



*presents*

# Opal Lee: Grandmother of Juneteenth

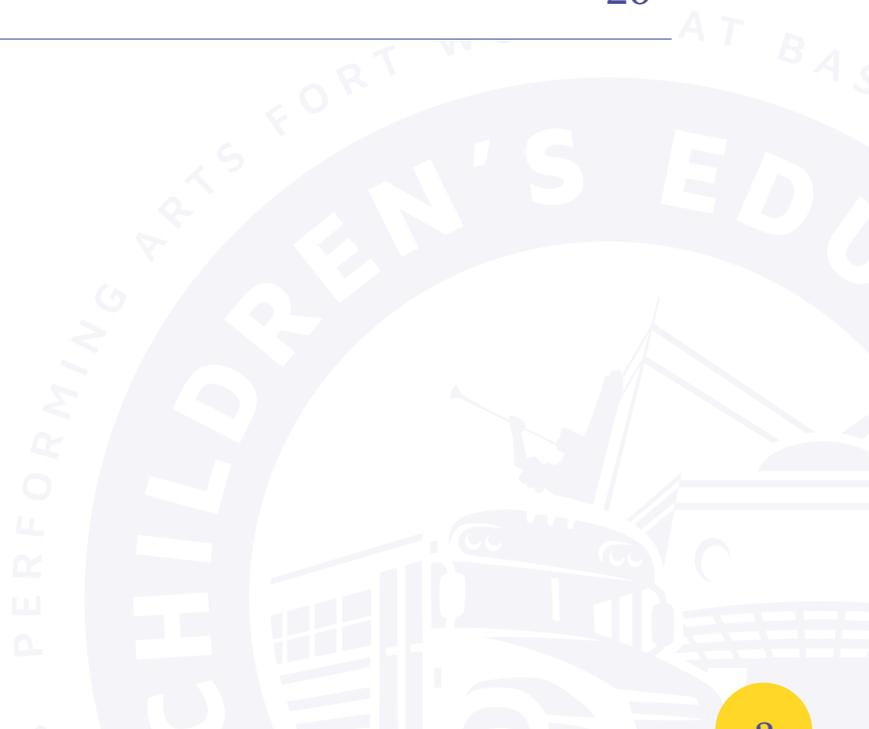
*featuring*

**Opal Lee and Bob Ray Sanders**

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# Introduction

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Dear Teachers,

We are happy to present a virtual program which was videotaped on the stage of Bass Performance Hall in May, 2022, featuring well-respected journalist and reporter, Bob Ray Sanders, asking Ms. Opal Lee to tell us about her journey to making Juneteenth a national holiday. She is a Fort Worth fixture who has done many things in her life—she is a graduate of Terrell High School; a FWISD classroom teacher; along with Leonora Rolla, a founding member of the Tarrant County Black Historical and Genealogical Society; and the creator of Opal's Farm and Food Bank, which provides needed food for many in the community. However, her crowning achievement is her push to get Juneteenth to be named a federal holiday. She is open, honest, and wise. We hope you will learn something about this incredible lady from Fort Worth.

There are several TEKS objectives which may be achieved through watching this video. Among them are—

## **Social Studies 113.19**

A1) Students study history of Texas from early times to the present. Students examine the full scope of Texas history, including Natural Texas and its People; Age of Contact; Spanish Colonial; Mexican National; Revolution and Republic; Early Statehood; Texas in the Civil War and Reconstruction; Cotton, Cattle, and Railroads; Age of Oil; Texas in the Great Depression and World War II; Civil Rights and Conservatism; and Contemporary Texas eras.

(2) To support the teaching of the essential knowledge and skills, the use of a variety of rich primary and secondary source material such as biographies, autobiographies, novels, speeches, letters, diaries, poetry, songs, and images is encouraged. Motivating resources are available from museums, historical sites, presidential libraries, and local and state preservation societies.

(7) State and federal laws mandate a variety of celebrations and observances, including Celebrate Freedom Week.

A) Including the Emancipation Proclamation

We hope you will look over the information we have provided, including some explanations of the people mentioned in the video, and enjoy meeting this lady, up close.

Please let us know if you have questions or problems.  
Thank you.



Sue Buratto  
Director of Education  
Performing Arts Fort Worth  
[sburatto@basshall.com](mailto:sburatto@basshall.com)  
817.212.4302

# Biography of Ms. Opal Lee

Opal Broadus Flake Lee was born October 7, 1926, in Marshall, Texas, and moved with her family when she was 10 years old to Fort Worth. In June 1939 her parents bought a house in the 900 block of East Annie Street, in what was then a mostly white area. On June 19, 1939, white rioters vandalized and burned down her home. Lee was twelve years old at the time.

She graduated from Terrell High School, Fort Worth's Black high school, in 1943. She attended Wiley College in Marshall where she earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education. She taught elementary school for many years in the Fort Worth ISD. She eventually earned a master's degree in counseling from the University of North Texas and served as a counselor for the Fort Worth ISD until her retirement in 1977.



After her retirement, she became involved in many community projects. She was a charter member of the Tarrant County Black Historical and Genealogical Society so that she and Lenora Rolla worked to make James E. Guinn Elementary School, IM Terrell High School and Mount Zion Baptist Church recognized as historical sites. She has received 3 honorary doctorates.

She and others campaigned for years to make Juneteenth a national holiday. She would lead a walk 2.5 miles each year, representing the 2 1/2 years it took for news of the Emancipation Proclamation to reach Texas. She has marched not only in Texas, but also in Fort Smith and Little Rock, Arkansas; Las Vegas, Nevada; Madison and Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Atlanta, Georgia; Selma, Alabama; and the Carolinas. She led a petition campaign for a Juneteenth national holiday, gathering 1.6 million signatures.



*Juneteenth a national holiday.*

On June 19, 2021, she finally succeeded, when President Biden signed a bill into law making **Juneteenth National Independence Day** a federal holiday. She was a guest at the bill signing ceremony in the White House and she received a standing ovation when she was recognized.

She is a founding member of **Transform 1012 North Main Street**, an organization of nonprofits and arts groups, working to convert the former Ku Klux Klan auditorium into the Fred Rouse Center and Museum for Arts and Community. Fred Rouse was a Black man who was lynched by a Fort Worth mob in 1921.

Ms. Lee was named 2021 “Texan of the Year” by the Dallas Morning News for her activism. She was included in a 2021 book *Unsung Heroes* for operating a food bank, a farm and community garden, Opal’s Farm, on the banks of the Trinity River during the Covid-19 crisis to feed those who do not have enough to eat. She recently has been nominated by Congressman Marc Veasey for a Nobel Peace Prize and she recently published a children's book, called *Juneteenth, A Children’s Story*. She says, “*If we don’t remember what we have been through, our nation is doomed to repeat it.*”



*Ms. Opal with Gregory Joel, center, manager of the farm and Charlie Blaylock at Opal’s Farm, on the banks of the Trinity River in the United Riverside district*

# The Emancipation Proclamation

January 1, 1863

## Background

It was the end of the second year of the war; more than 100 battles had been fought and neither side was winning. The North had lost many men in the war. The South was using slave labor in many ways to fight and support their efforts in the war. Congress had passed small ways to award freedom to escaped slaves. But by making an executive order—a proclamation—President Abraham Lincoln was taking away slaves throughout the “States and parts of States which...are in rebellion against the United States,” to aid the North.

President Lincoln was originally not certain that he had the power to outlaw slavery. In normal times he couldn't just overturn laws. And because slavery was mentioned in the Constitution, he could not with a proclamation, do away with slavery. However eventually he decided that a country at war was allowed to seize “property” that the enemy was using to fight the war, and in this case, that property included the south's slave labor. Lincoln, as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, used emancipation as a tactic of war, not just as the mission itself: by reasserting his mission was to save the Union, he could justify emancipation of enslaved people.



*The first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation with his Cabinet*

While the decree could not free slaves in areas where the United States could not enforce the Proclamation, it sent a signal to Blacks and the Confederacy that enslavement would no longer be tolerated. It was an invitation to slaves to take up arms and fight to end the war. And 185,000 did.

While it was limited, it transformed the character of the war. Lincoln called it *An Act of Justice*. He believed that once the war was won, Congress would end slavery in the entire country and proclaimed that the Union planned to do just that. Just before he signed the document, he said, “I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right than I do in signing this paper.”

Celebrations and pandemonium broke out across the country on January 1 at 8 p.m. after news of Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation went out on telegraph wires. Men squealed, women fainted, dogs barked, and whites and Blacks shook hands. Cannons in the Navy Yard in Washington D.C. began to go off. Many Abolitionists, such as Henry Ward Beecher said, “The Proclamation... gives liberty a moral recognition.” Frederick Douglass pronounced it “a worthy celebration of the first step on the part of the nation in its departure from the thralldom [domination, bondage] of the ages.” He continued to point out that the Emancipation Proclamation was but the first step. And while the decree could not free slaves in areas where the US could not enforce the Proclamation, it *did* send a signal to slaves and the Confederacy that enslavement would no longer be tolerated.

Lincoln was aware that the Proclamation was just an initial step. True freedom also depended on the Union winning the Civil War and making freedom a plank of the 1864 Republican Party platform. When he was nominated for a second term, he said that constitutional emancipation was “a fitting and necessary conclusion to the final success of the Union cause,” and in 1865 the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment confirmed it. But many felt it *was* that first step, the Emancipation Proclamation, which began the rolling back of enslavement of all kinds.

With Emancipation, Blacks could now—

- 1) work for wages
- 2) own land
- 3) name themselves
- 4) read and write
- 5) serve in the military
- 6) travel
- 7) worship freely

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In the Second Inaugural Address, he went further, in saying that the war is best understood as divine punishment for the sin of slavery, a sin for which all Americans were complicit. He called on passages from the Bible to explain that God used the war to finally end slavery, once and for all.

As Jon Meacham says in his biography of Lincoln, *And There Was Light*, that while he did much good, he left much undone. And because of the assassination of Lincoln the following April, much was left undone for many years to come.

For perspective, we should note that Great Britain had granted emancipation to their slaves in the 1830s, but it was gradual. Any compensation was given to the slaveowners, not the former slaves, and it happened in tiers, over many years. In this country Lincoln's similar act, happening with one proclamation and later an amendment in 1860s, was looked upon as radical. He thought emancipation was the right, just and morally sound thing to do.

So, as Meacham says, military necessity was one motive but conscience in the service of justice was another, and perhaps the war was an excuse to finally make the change. As the war continued to drag on, he was repeatedly asked to moderate his emancipation stance so that the war could end, and the Union could be saved. He could not, he would not do that.

W.E.B. DuBois wrote many years later about Lincoln, "I love him not because he was perfect but because he was not and yet triumphed." Many others criticized Lincoln through the years for not being single-minded enough in his mission to end slavery, once and for all, sooner. However, throughout the years after his death his accomplishments have been heralded. As an article in the *Liverpool Daily Post* wrote of him said, "Absolute truth, stern resolution, clear insight, solemn faithfulness, courage that cannot be daunted, hopefulness that cannot be dashed—these are qualities that go a long way to make up a hero. And it would not be easy to dispute Mr. Lincoln's claim to all these."

*Taken from the National Archives—*  
by John Hope Franklin  
and *And There Was Light*  
by Jon Meacham

# Timeline

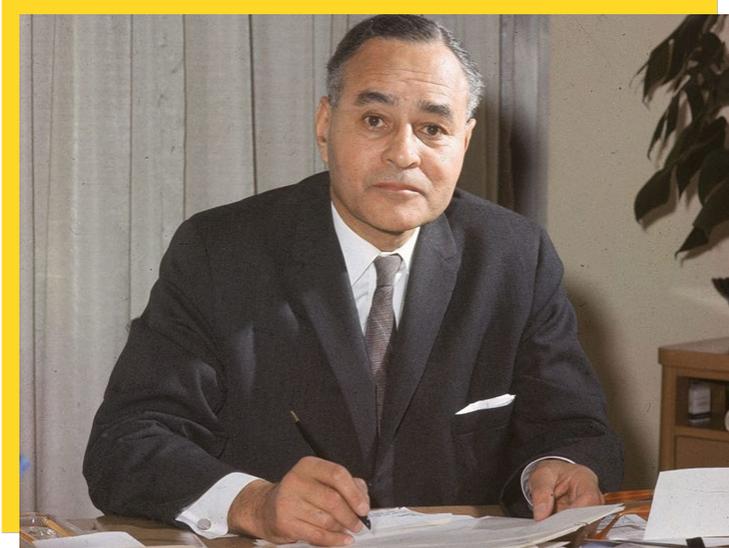
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- September 22, 1862      During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln announces the Emancipation. It sets January 1863, as the date of Freedom for over 3 million people living as slaves. His Document establishes that the Civil War is a fight against slavery.
- January 1, 1864      President Abraham Lincoln officially signs the Emancipation Proclamation, releasing servants from bondage. Many Black men volunteer to join the Union army to help win the war.
- April 9, 1865      General Robert E. Lee surrenders to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox in Virginia. This ends the Civil War.
- June 19, 1865      General Gordon Granger reads General Order No. 3 in Galveston and ends slavery in Texas, now called Juneteenth.
- December 6, 1865      The 13th Amendment is ratified, making slavery illegal in US.
- June 19, 1866      The first official Juneteenth celebrations take place around Texas.
- June, 1968      Civil Rights activist Ralph Abernathy encourages Black Americans to celebrate Juneteenth.
- June 15, 2021      The US Senate and Congress vote to make Juneteenth a national holiday. President Joe Biden signs the legislation into law on June 19<sup>th</sup>, with Opal Lee standing by his side.

# Nobel Peace Prize

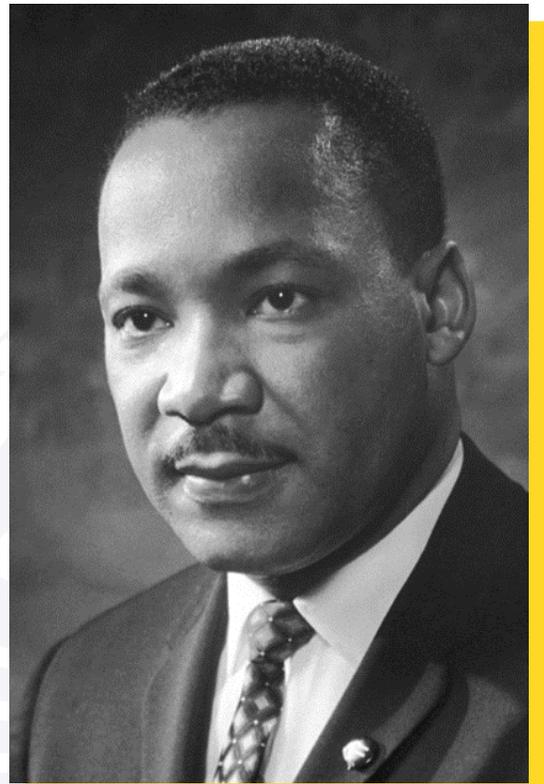
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The Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded 103 times to 140 laureates between 1901 and 2022. Four were mentioned in the video.



**Ralph Bunche** in **1950** for mediating peace in Palestine in 1948-1949. He was the first person of color to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

**Martin Luther King** in **1964** for his non-violent struggle for civil rights for the Afro-American population.





**Jimmy Carter** in **2002** for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development.

**Barack Obama** in **2009** for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples and his vision of a nuclear-free world.



## People You should Know from the Film

**Dr. Jennifer Giddings Brooks** is the wife of Mr. Roy Brooks, Precinct 1 County Commissioner, and she is a leader and role model in her own right. She received her bachelor's and master's degrees from TCU in education and speech pathology. She served as principal at Briscoe Elementary and lead it from low performing to exemplary status. She received her doctorate from Texas Woman's University and worked for several years at TCU in the Center for Urban Education. She has served as president of the Links, Inc. and has led many efforts to support the youth of greater Fort Worth.



**Ralph Johnson Bunche** (August 7, 1904-1971) was born in Detroit, Michigan. After his parents died, his grandmother, who had been born into slavery, raised him. His intellectual brilliance appeared early. He was the valedictorian of his graduating class at Jefferson High School in Los Angeles, where he had been a debater and all-around athlete who competed in football, basketball, baseball, and track. At the University of California at Los Angeles, he supported himself with an athletic scholarship, which paid for his collegiate expenses, and with a janitorial job, which paid for his personal expenses. He played varsity basketball on championship teams, was active in debate and campus journalism, and was graduated in 1927, *summa cum laude*, valedictorian of his class, with a major in international relations. With a scholarship granted by Harvard University and a fund of a thousand dollars raised by the black community of Los Angeles, Bunche began his graduate studies in political science. He completed his

master's degree in 1928 and for the next six years alternated between teaching at Howard University and working toward the doctorate at Harvard.

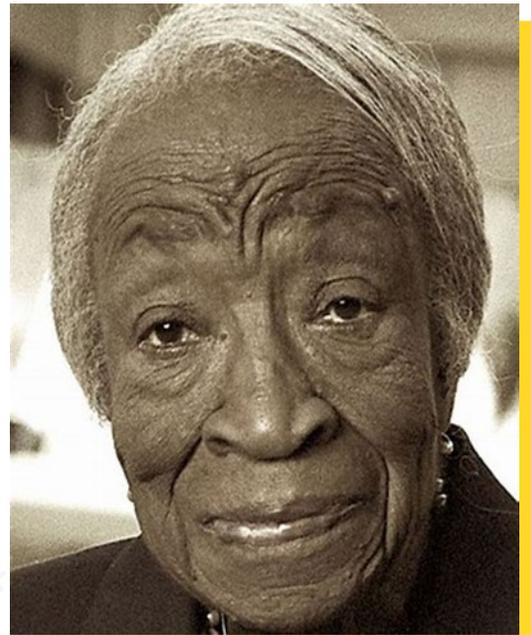
Throughout his career, Bunche maintained strong ties with education. He chaired the Department of Political Science at Howard University from 1928 until 1950; taught at Harvard University from 1950 to 1952; served as a member of the New York City Board of Education (1958-1964), as a member of the Board of Overseers of Harvard University (1960-1965), as a member of the Board of the Institute of International Education, and as a trustee of Oberlin College, Lincoln University, and New Lincoln School. He worked while at Howard University in the civil rights movement. He was a member of the "Black Cabinet" consulted on minority problems by Roosevelt's administration; declined President Truman's offer of the position of assistant secretary of state; helped to lead the civil rights march organized by Martin Luther King, Jr., in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965; and supported the action programs of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and of the Urban League.

Ralph Bunche's enduring fame arises from his service to the U. S. government and to the UN. He worked as a UN Mediator towards an eventual armistice in Palestine between Arabs and Jews—something that many others felt was an impossible task. He continued his work for the UN as Undersecretary General until 1968, taking on special assignments and usually the most difficult situations around the world. He was the first person of color to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.



**Dr. Ron Myers** (1956-2018) was an American physician, Baptist minister, musician, and civil rights activist. While he grew up in Wisconsin, he ran a family health center in Mississippi where there were scarce medical resources and a high infant mortality rate. He also worked to highlight the difficult working conditions of African American people in that area as well as greater recognition of Juneteenth as a national holiday. He was active in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas, to improve the lives of African Americans.

**Hazel Harvey Peace** (1907-2008) built a legacy of outstanding teaching and service to the FWISD, as well as the city of Fort Worth, working as a community activist. The namesake of an elementary school, municipal building, and library youth center in Fort Worth, Peace overcame racial segregation to provide opportunities for African Americans, youth, and women in Fort Worth, Dallas, and throughout the state of Texas. She worked at IM Terrell in many roles, from 1924 to 1972, and is recognized by many as “the matriarch” of Terrell.



She graduated from high school at 13, attended Howard University and began teaching at Terrell while still a teenager. During the summers she studied to achieve her master’s degree at Columbia University; she also did postgraduate work at the University of Wisconsin, Vassar, Hampton University and Atlanta University. She served as the Dean of Girls at Terrell, but she also started the debate team, served as school counselor, taught English and history, started a children’s theater program and served as Vice-Principal. It is said that she expected a level of excellence from her

students that she strove for in her own life. After retiring from Terrell, she taught at Bishop College, Paul Quinn College, Huston-Tillotson and Prairie View A&M. As if this were not enough, she also was a tireless volunteer for many additional causes in the community. Many say she was the creator of the entire middle class of Fort Worth Black citizens; she taught her students that one succeeded by “excellence, hard work, and fair play.”

She received many well-deserved honors in addition to the elementary school and municipal building named for her. Bishop College recognized her in 1985 as a “Texas Black Woman of Courage.” In 1988 she received the FW Volunteer Award and the United Way Hercules Award. In 1992 Texas Wesleyan University awarded her a Doctor of Humane Letters. In 1999 the Fort Worth Library renamed the children’s section at the Central Branch “The Hazel Harvey Peace Youth Center.” In 2001 she was an Olympic Torchbearer when the torch came through Fort Worth, Texas. In 2007 a Professorship in Children’s Library Service was established at the University of North Texas in her honor. This was the first endowed professorship to be named for an African American woman at a Texas four-year public university. She died in 2008; as historian Richard Selcer said when talking about this amazing woman, “Her death was not just the Black community’s loss; it was the entire city’s loss.”

**Lenora Rolla** (1904-2001) was an African American activist, businesswoman, educator, and historian who founded the Tarrant County Black Historical and Genealogical Society, which later was named in her honor. She was born in east Texas but moved to Fort Worth when she was five years old. She graduated from Terrell High School, attended Prairie View A & M, graduated from Alcorn College in Mississippi, and took classes at Howard University. In the 1940's she worked at a settlement house in Washington D.C. and later with the famous civil rights activist, Mary McLeod Bethune, who was Director of Negro Affairs for President Franklin D. Roosevelt.



*Lenora Rolla with President Lyndon B. Johnson*

During World War II, she worked for the US Maritime Commission as a supervisor of clerical workers.

In 1949 she moved back to Fort Worth and continued her activism in civic organizations and church work. She met Martin Luther King, Jr. while covering the Montgomery, Alabama, Brown vs. Board of Education trial for a local newspaper in 1954. She returned to cover the Montgomery bus boycott and the historic March on Washington in 1963 when Dr. King presented his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. She later said about Dr. King, "He gave me motivation to keep on keeping on and to be less disturbed by our position...[he] has given me more steel in my limbs and faith."

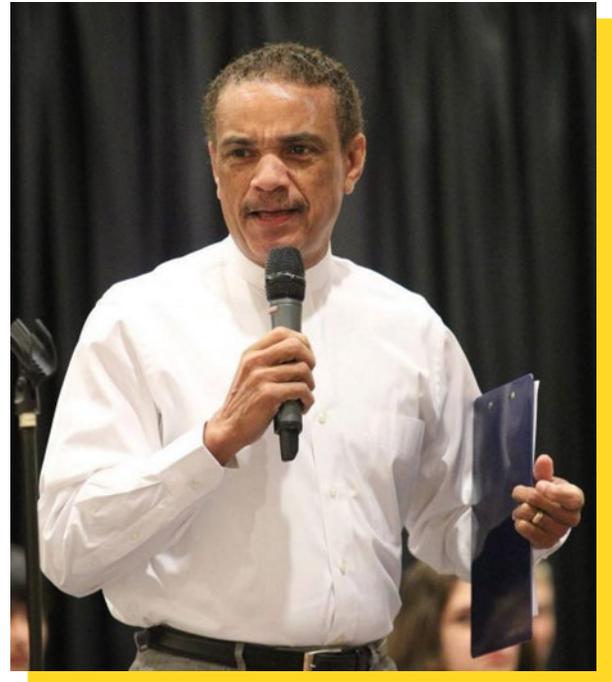
In 1974 she was appointed to the Fort Worth's Bicentennial planning committee and charged with gathering the history of African Americans in early Fort Worth history. That prompted her to create the Tarrant County Black Historical and Genealogical Society in 1977. In 1997 the society was renamed the Lenora Rolla Heritage Center Museum in her honor.

In 1986 she participated in the Hands Across America benefit to end homelessness, standing along Lancaster Avenue with her friend and fellow activist, Opal Lee. She was recognized and honored by both the mayor of Fort Worth and the Texas Senate in 1971; was named a First Century Distinguished Alumni Award in 1983; was inducted into the Texas Black Women's Hall of Fame in 1986; received the National Endowment for the Arts Award in 1988; received the National Endowment for the Arts Award in 1988; and named the Outstanding Woman of Fort Worth in 1989.

**Bob Ray Sanders'** journalism career spanned more than four decades and three media: newspaper, television and radio. In 2015 he retired as Associate Editor and Senior Columnist from the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, the newspaper where he began his professional career. As a young journalist with the paper, he served as courthouse reporter and political writer before leaving to begin a distinguished career in broadcasting.

He joined KERA-TV in 1972 as a reporter for the station's innovative Newsroom program. Sanders later served as manager of KERA Radio, vice president/station manager of KERA-TV, and host and producer of the station's award-winning program, News Addition.

A 1969 graduate of North Texas State University, Sanders is past president of the Press Club of Fort Worth. He is a member of the Society of Professional Journalists, the National Association of Black Journalists and the Dallas/Fort Worth Association of Black Journalists. He currently serves on the advisory board of Community Hospice of Texas, the AIDS Outreach Center in Fort Worth and Goodwill Industries. He has served as "Professional in Residence" in the Journalism Department of Texas Christian University, where he taught the course, "Race, Gender and Mass Media."



Sanders has received some of journalism's most prestigious awards, among them: five awards from the Houston, New York, and Chicago film festivals, five Dallas Press Club KATIE Awards, three Corporation for Public Broadcasting Awards; a regional Emmy Award; a National Association of Black Journalists award for Best TV Sports Feature, and a National Headliner Award for outstanding investigative reporting. Other honors include: "Ethics Award" from the TCU Journalism Department; Distinguished Alumni Award, Fort Worth Independent School District; induction into the "Hall of Honor," University of North Texas Journalism Department; induction in the Texas Literary Hall of Fame; an honorary doctorate degree from Jarvis Christian College and the "Thomas Jefferson Liberty Award" from the Dallas Civil Liberties Union.

# What Is Juneteenth?

by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. | Originally posted on “*The Root*”

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## The First Juneteenth

“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.” —*General Orders, Number 3; Headquarters District of Texas, Galveston, June 19, 1865*

When Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger issued the above order, he had no idea that, in establishing the Union Army’s authority over the people of Texas, he was also establishing the basis for a holiday, “Juneteenth” (“June” plus “nineteenth”), today the most popular annual celebration of emancipation from slavery in the United States. After all, by the time Granger assumed command of the Department of Texas, the Confederate capital in Richmond had fallen; the “Executive” to whom he referred, President Lincoln, was dead; and the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery was well on its way to ratification.

But Granger wasn’t just a few months late. The Emancipation Proclamation itself, ending slavery in the Confederacy (at least on paper), had taken effect two-and-a-half years before, and in the interim, close to 200,000 black men had enlisted in the fight. So, formalities aside, wasn’t it all over, literally, but the shouting?

It would be easy to think so in our world of immediate communication, but as Granger and the 1,800 bluecoats under him soon found out, news traveled slowly in Texas. Whatever Gen. Robert E. Lee had surrendered in Virginia, the Army of the Trans-Mississippi had held out until late May, and even with its formal surrender on June 2, a number of ex-rebels in the region took to bushwhacking and plunder.

That’s not all that plagued the extreme western edge of the former Confederate states. Since the capture of New Orleans in 1862, slave owners in Mississippi, Louisiana and other points east had been migrating to Texas to escape the Union Army’s reach. In a hurried re-enactment of the original Middle Passage, more than 150,000 slaves had made the trek west, according to historian Leon Litwack in his book *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*. As one former slave he quotes recalled, “It looked like everybody in the world was going to Texas.”

When Texas fell and Granger dispatched his now famous order No. 3, it wasn’t exactly instant magic for most of the Lone Star State’s 250,000 slaves. On plantations, masters had to decide when and how to announce the news — or wait for a government agent to arrive — and it was not uncommon for them to delay until after the harvest. Even in Galveston city, the ex-Confederate mayor flouted the Army by forcing the freed people back to work, as historian Elizabeth Hayes Turner details in her comprehensive essay, “Juneteenth: Emancipation and Memory,” in *Lone Star Pasts: Memory and History in Texas*.

Those who acted on the news did so at their peril. As quoted in Litwack's book, former slave Susan Merritt recalled, "You could see lots of niggers hangin' to trees in Sabine bottom right after freedom, 'cause they cotch 'em swimmin' 'cross Sabine River and shoot 'em.'" In one extreme case, according to Hayes Turner, a former slave named Katie Darling continued working for her mistress another six years (She "whip me after the war jist like she did 'fore," Darling said).

Hardly the recipe for a celebration — which is what makes the story of Juneteenth all the more remarkable. Defying confusion and delay, terror and violence, the newly "freed" black men and women of Texas, with the aid of the Freedmen's Bureau (itself delayed from arriving until September 1865), now had a date to rally around. In one of the most inspiring grassroots efforts of the post-Civil War period, they transformed June 19 from a day of unheeded military orders into their own annual rite, "Juneteenth," beginning one year later in 1866."

"The way it was explained to me," one heir to the tradition is quoted in Hayes Turner's essay, "the 19th of June wasn't the exact day the Negro was freed. But that's the day they told them that they was free ... And my daddy told me that they whooped and hollered and bored holes in trees with augers and stopped it up with [gun] powder and light and that would be their blast for the celebration.'"

## Other Contenders

There were other available anniversaries for celebrating emancipation, to be sure, including the following:

- Sept. 22: the day Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation Order in 1862
- Jan. 1: the day it took effect in 1863
- Jan. 31: the date the 13th Amendment passed Congress in 1865, officially abolishing the institution of slavery
- Dec. 6: the day the 13th Amendment was ratified that year
- April 3: the day Richmond, Va., fell
- April 9: the day Lee surrendered to Ulysses Grant at Appomattox, Va.
- April 16: the day slavery was abolished in the nation's capital in 1862
- May 1: Decoration Day, which, as David Blight movingly recounts in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, the former slaves of Charleston, S.C., founded by giving the Union war dead a proper burial at the site of the fallen planter elite's Race Course
- July 4: America's first Independence Day, some "four score and seven years" before President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation

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Each of these anniversaries has its celebrants today. Each has also had its share of conflicts and confusion. July 4 is compelling, of course, but it was also problematic for many African Americans, since the country's founders had given in on slavery and their descendants had expanded it through a series of failed "compromises," at the nadir of which Frederick Douglass had made his own famous declaration to the people of Rochester, N.Y., on July 5, 1852: "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity."

The most logical candidate for commemoration of the slave's freedom was Jan. 1. In fact, the minute Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had taken effect at the midpoint of the war, Northern black leaders like Douglass led massive celebrations in midnight jubilees; and on its 20th anniversary in 1883, they gathered again in Washington, D.C., to honor Douglass for all that he and his compatriots had achieved.

Yet even the original Emancipation Day had its drawbacks — not only because it coincided with New Year's Day and the initiation dates of numerous other laws, but also because the underlying proclamation, while of enormous symbolic significance, didn't free all the slaves, only those in the Confederate states in areas liberated by Union troops, and not those in the border states in which slavery remained legal until the ratification of the 13th Amendment. (Historians estimate that about 500,000 slaves — out of a total of 3.9 million — liberated themselves by escaping to Union lines between 1863 and the end of the war; the rest remained in slavery.)

Because of its partial effects, some scholars argue that perhaps the most significant aspect of the Emancipation Proclamation was the authorization of black men to fight in the war, both because their service proved to be crucial to the North's war effort, and because it would be cited as irrefutable proof of the right of blacks to citizenship (which would be granted by the 14th Amendment).

No one in the post-Civil War generation could deny that something fundamental had changed as a result of Lincoln's war measure, but dwelling on it was a separate matter, David Blight explains. Among those in the 'It's time to move on' camp were Episcopal priest and scholar Alexander Crummell, who, in a May 1885 address to the graduates of Storer College, said, "What I would fain have you guard against is not the memory of slavery, but the constant recollection of it, as the commanding thought of a new people." On the other side was Douglass, who insisted on lighting a perpetual flame to "the causes, the incidents, and the results of the late rebellion." After all, he liked to say, the legacy of black people in America could "be traced like that of a wounded man through a crowd by the blood."

Hard as Douglass tried to make emancipation matter every day, Jan. 1 continued to be exalted — and increasingly weighed down by the betrayal of Reconstruction. (As detailed in [Plessy v. Ferguson: Who Was Plessy?](#), the Supreme Court's gift to the 20th anniversary of emancipation was striking down the Civil Rights Act of 1875.) W.E.B. Du Bois used this to biting effect in his Swiftian short story, "A Mild Suggestion" (1912), in which he had his black main character provide a final solution to Jim Crow America's obsession with racial purity: On the next Jan. 1 ("for historical reasons" it would "probably be best," he explained), all blacks should either be invited to dine with whites and poisoned or gathered in large assemblies to be stabbed and shot. "The next morning there would be ten million funerals," Du Bois' protagonist predicted, "and therefore no Negro problem."

### **Juneteenth Endures**

While national black leaders continued to debate the importance of remembering other milestone anniversaries, the freed people of Texas went about the business of celebrating their local version of Emancipation Day. For them, Juneteenth was, from its earliest incarnations, as Hayes Turner and others have recorded, a past that was "usable" as an occasion for gathering lost family members, measuring progress against freedom and inculcating rising generations with the values of self-improvement and racial uplift. This was accomplished through readings of the Emancipation Proclamation, religious sermons and spirituals, the preservation of slave food delicacies (always at the center: the almighty barbecue pit), as well as the incorporation of new games and traditions, from baseball to rodeos and, later, stock car races and overhead flights.

Like a boxer sparring with his rival, year after year Juneteenth was strengthened by the contest its committee members had to wage against the Jim Crow faithful of Texas, who, in the years following Reconstruction, rallied around their version of history in an effort to glorify (and whitewash) past cruelties and defeats. When whites forbade blacks from using their public spaces, black people gathered near rivers and lakes and eventually raised enough money to buy their own celebration sites, among them Emancipation Park in Houston and Booker T. Washington Park in Mexia.



Texas Juneteenth Day Celebration, 1900 (Austin History Center, Austin Public Library)

When white leaders like Judge Lewis Fisher of Galveston likened the black freedman (“Rastus,” he called him) to “a prairie colt turned into a feed horse [to eat] ignorantly of everything,” Juneteenth celebrants dressed in their finest clothes, however poor, trumpeting the universal concerns of citizenship and liberty, with hero-speakers from the Reconstruction era and symbols like the Goddess of Liberty on floats and in living tableaux. And when Houston refused to close its banks on Memorial Day in 1919 (only to do so four days later on Jefferson Davis Day, honoring the former Confederate president), Juneteenth celebrants still did their own remembering, in Hayes Turner’s words, to project “identification with American ideals” in “a potent life-giving event ... a joyful retort to messages of overt racism ... a public counter-demonstration to displays of Confederate glorification and a counter-memory to the valorization of the Lost Cause.”

Strengthening the holiday’s chances at survival was its move across state lines — one person, one family, one carload or train ticket at a time. As Isabel Wilkerson writes in her brilliant book, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*, “The people from Texas took Juneteenth Day to Los Angeles, Oakland, Seattle, and other places they went.” As it spread, the observance was also changing. This was especially true in the 1920s, Turner explains, with the Consumer Age infiltrating black society with advertisements for fancier Juneteenth getups and more elaborate displays of pomp and circumstance.

This did not mean that Juneteenth’s advances remained unbroken, however. Despite local committees’ best efforts, with each new slight, with each new segregation law, with each new textbook whitewashing and brutal lynching in the South, African Americans felt increasingly disconnected from their history, so that by the time World War II shook the nation, they could no longer faithfully celebrate freedom in a land that still rendered them second-class citizens worthy of dying for their country but not worthy of being honored or treated equally for it. Hence, the wartime Double V campaign.

It is possible that Juneteenth would have vanished from the calendar (at least outside of Texas) had it not been for another remarkable turn of events during the same civil rights movement that had exposed many of the country’s shortcomings about race relations. Actually, it occurred at the tail end of the movement, two months after its most prominent leader had been shot down.

As is well-known, Martin Luther King Jr. had been planning a return to the site of his famous “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington, this time to lead a Poor People’s March emphasizing nagging class inequalities. Following his assassination, it was left to others to carry out the plan, among them his best friend, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, and his widow, Coretta Scott King. When it became clear that the Poor People’s March was falling short of its goals, the organizers decided to cut it short on June 19, 1968, well aware that it was now just over a century since the first Juneteenth celebration in Texas.

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As William H. Wiggins Jr., a scholar of black folklore and cultural traditions, explained in a 2009 interview with Smithsonian magazine: “[T]hese delegates for the summer took that idea of the [Juneteenth] celebration back to their respective communities. [F]or example, there was one in Milwaukee.” Another in Minnesota. It was, in effect, another great black migration. Since then, Wiggins added, Juneteenth “has taken on a life of its own.”

### **Juneteenth Today**

Responding to this new energy, in 1979 Texas became the first state to make Juneteenth an official holiday. (Ironically, the bill was passed on June 7, the anniversary of Homer Plessy’s arrest on the East Louisiana line, as covered in *Plessy v Ferguson: Who Was Plessy*.) Leading the charge was Rep. Al Edwards of Houston, often referred to as “the father of the Juneteenth holiday,” who framed it as a “source of strength” for young people, according to Hayes Turner. (As a concession to Lost Cause devotees, Texas reaffirmed its commitment to observing Jan. 19 as Confederate Heroes Day.)

Since then, 41 other states and the District of Columbia have recognized Juneteenth as a state holiday or holiday observance, including Rhode Island earlier this year. “This is similar to what God instructed Joshua to do as he led the Israelites into the Promised Land,” Al Edwards told Yahoo in 2007. “A national celebration of Juneteenth, state by state, serves a similar purpose for us. Every year we must remind successive generations that this event triggered a series of events that one by one defines the challenges and responsibilities of successive generations. That’s why we need this holiday.”

You can follow Edwards’ efforts and others’ worldwide at [juneteenth.com](http://juneteenth.com), founded in 1997 by Clifford Robinson of New Orleans. Another organization, the National Juneteenth Observance Foundation, founded and chaired by the Rev. Ronald Meyers, is committed to making Juneteenth a federal holiday on a par with Flag and Patriot days. (Note: They are not calling for Juneteenth to be a paid government holiday, like Columbus Day.) “We may have gotten there in different ways and at different times,” Meyers told Time magazine in 2008, “but you can’t really celebrate freedom in America by just going with the Fourth of July.” You can follow his organization’s activities at [nationaljuneteenth.com](http://nationaljuneteenth.com).

These days, Juneteenth is an opportunity not only to celebrate but also to speak out. Last year, for example, *The Root* reported that the U.S. Department of State leveraged the holiday for releasing its 2012 Trafficking in Persons Report, with then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noting, “Today we are celebrating what’s called ‘Juneteenth’ ... But the end of legal slavery in the United States, and in other countries around the world, has not, unfortunately, meant the end of slavery. Today it is estimated as many as 27 million people around the world are victims of modern slavery.”

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As further proof that Juneteenth is back on the rise, this Wednesday, June 19, Washington, D.C., will be abuzz during the unveiling of a Frederick Douglass statue in the famed U.S. Capitol Visitor Center, thanks to the work of D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton. (Douglass will join three other African Americans in the hall: Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King Jr.) No doubt Douglass would be surprised to learn that such an honor had not been scheduled for Jan. 1 (the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation), but glad nevertheless that the country is still finding ways to remember “the causes, the incidents, and the results of the late rebellion.”

### **Postscript**

I grew up in West Virginia, many miles from the site of the first Juneteenth, and I never heard of the holiday until I went off to college. But I have come to see the beauty in its unexpected past and persistence. Besides, June 19 is generally a more comfortable day for outdoor family fun — for fine jazz music and barbecue — than Jan. 1, a day short on sunlight. In my article “Should Blacks Collect Racist Memorabilia?” I quoted W.E.B. Du Bois’ summation of Black Reconstruction: “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.” At the time I failed to appreciate just how apt a description it was.

Of all Emancipation Day observances, Juneteenth falls closest to the summer solstice (this Friday, June 21), the longest day of the year, when the sun, at its zenith, defies the darkness in every state, including those once shadowed by slavery. By choosing to celebrate the last place in the South that freedom touched — reflecting the mystical glow of history and lore, memory and myth, as Ralph Ellison evoked in his posthumous novel, *Juneteenth* — we remember the shining promise of emancipation, along with the bloody path America took by delaying it and deferring fulfillment of those simple, unanticipating words in Gen. Granger’s original order No. 3: that “This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves.” My hope this Juneteenth is that we never forget it.

Fifty of the 100 Amazing Facts will be published on The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross website. Read all 100 Facts on The Root.



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