

OPEN CALL - Juneteenth: What Freedom Means to Me

Celebrations...we love them. Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays...count us in! But there is a new national holiday that resides within a category all its own. That holiday - Juneteenth - honors June 19, 1865's "General Order No. 3" which informed the slaves in Texas (the last to be notified) that they were free.

With our instant communication abilities today, it is hard to fathom that this order came down two-and-a-half years after Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation which was issued on January 1, 1863. And while African Americans behind Union lines were declared free on that day, the Confederacy's General Robert E. Lee did not surrender until April, 1865. Two months later Texas - then slavery's last outpost - received the news of that "General Order No. 3" when federal troops led by Major General Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865.

It is said that the very last slaves were freed from the Pleasant Retreat Plantation, an 11,000 acre plantation in East Texas's Limestone County. Plantation owner Logan Stroud and his father had moved from Georgia to Texas and built the largest plantation in the county using slave labor. Now it had all come down to this moment. Logan Stroud, age 51, stepped out on his front porch and began to read to the 150 enslaved African Americans who had gathered to hear these words, "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..."

What feelings and emotions must have erupted that day...joy, hope for the future, bewilderment, anger that the news came two years late, reflection on past suffering, sorrow that those who had passed on were not able to experience the moment. There might have been uncertainty, fear of the unknown, excitement over new opportunities, freedom's exhilaration, economic worries, prayers of thanksgiving, praise to God...too many to name.

The following year, 1866, the Freedmen of Texas decided that June 19th would be celebrated annually as Jubilee Day. Other names used were Freedom Day, Liberation

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Day, Emancipation Day, and Juneteenth Independence Day. Celebrations began to include community events such as parades, cookouts, prayer gatherings, historical and cultural readings and musical performances.

Fast forward to 2022: The Alpharetta Arts Center, Arts Alpharetta, and Alpharetta's Black History Committee invite you to honor the Juneteenth holiday with your original art that expresses the emotion of that day. Congress has declared that "History should be regarded as a means for understanding the past and solving the challenges of the future."

Scholar and novelist Ralph Ellison gives us a start: "What does it all mean beyond a glad noise for Juneteenth Day? What does freedom, what does emancipation mean?"

Sources:

<https://www.history.com/news/what-is-juneteenth>

<https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2020/06/the-birth-of-juneteenth-voices-of-the-enslaved/>