

Editorial: Juneteenth—celebration & metaphor

June 12, 2015

Texans will mark a vital—although historically embarrassing—milestone this week. We'll celebrate the 150th anniversary of the freedom of Texas slaves.



Editor Marv KnoxIf you remember Civil War history, you probably recall President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation Sept. 22, 1862, which freed all the slaves in the Confederate States of America still in rebellion against the United States, effective Jan. 1, 1863. Texans didn't find out about it until June 19, 1865, which explains the historical embarrassment.

The [juneteenth.com website](http://juneteenth.com) offers theories to explain why news of emancipation required more than two and a half years to reach the Lone Star State: A messenger was murdered on his way to Texas. Slaveholders deliberately withheld the information to keep slaves on the plantations. Federal troops waited for slave owners to take in one last harvest with slave labor. Texans questioned President Lincoln's authority over the rebellious states, which was the whole point of the war.

'All slaves are free'

Whatever the reason for the delay, freedom arrived in Texas on June 19, when Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger, backed by 2,000 U.S. troops, stood on the balcony of Ashton Villa in Galveston and read General Order No. 3:

“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 rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and free laborer.”

In an instant, slaves became free. Immediately, they became employees of the people who once owned them.

Across the years, Juneteenth—a mashup of “June” and “nineteenth”—became a day for celebrating African-American freedom and culture. As freed Texas slaves migrated, they took their celebration with them, initially in neighboring states and eventually far beyond. On June 13, 1979, Texas became the first state to proclaim June 19 as [Emancipation Day](#), an official holiday.

Sadly and ironically, Juneteenth represents a powerful metaphor.

Just as Texas slaves waited 33 months from signing and 30 months from implementation for the Emancipation Proclamation to free them, Americans of color—African-Americans prominently among them—still wait for equal justice and opportunity in their homeland.

Reflections on McKinney incident

As if we needed proof, the recent heinous treatment of black McKinney teenagers by a white police officer erased all doubt. And if anyone were still hard-headed enough to continue to doubt, the response of white North Texans to the incident reveals how racism pervades our society.

In a [column for Baptist News Global](#), Mark Wingfield cited comments about the African-American teens posted to Dallas Morning News articles:

- “They should break out the bleach and clean the pool from all the black filth.”
- “These are the same kids wondering why nobody will hire them even though they were the affirmative action darling of their college.”
- “Too bad they weren’t raised to be decent human beings. Simple as that.”
- “This trash will never learn. ... Why don’t they do what they are told? They knew they did not belong there, they refused to leave or obey legit orders. They got what they deserved.”

Of course, not every white person thinks that way. But Wingfield factors in the odds: “Given the demographic makeup of this region, it seems likely that many of those making these blatantly racist comments are church-goers or would identify themselves as Christians. This thought makes me sick to my stomach.”

Sick indeed. We must change our culture.

Christian values

As much as Christians value evangelism, going on mission trips, and operating food pantries, we must value equal status for all people, whatever their skin color, native tongue or worldview.

Privileged middle-class Anglo Baptists must stand in the gap between the afflicted and the haters. We must not tolerate racism—in action by police and others, in comments by neighbors and website posters, in policies by businesses, in statutes penned by lawmakers.

If we persist, maybe someday reality will reach the ideal. Maybe we will celebrate equality, not simply emancipation, on Juneteenth.