



Juneteenth in Oberlin

Though Juneteenth has its origins in Texas, it has grown to become a holiday celebrated nation-wide. Juneteenth "began" on June 19, 1865, as the Civil War was drawing to a close. (The last Confederate land forces surrendered by June 1865; Lee's Army had surrendered in April.) Though the Emancipation Proclamation had taken effect on January 1, 1863, it was not recognized or enforced in the south until after the war. (The Emancipation Proclamation freed all the slaves in the seceding states--but because the states in secession did not recognize the authority of the Union, they did not consider the document legally binding and did not comply.) So, even though the Union tried to emancipate the slaves in 1863, many slaves were not freed until much later--in this case, June 19, 1865, when Union General Gordon Granger and his troops arrived in Galveston, Texas, and announced and enforced the emancipation of the slaves in Texas. There was a spontaneous celebration at this announcement, and the first planned celebration was held the following year. (Please see the [national Juneteenth website](#) for more information about national and international celebrations.)



In addition to all the celebration, Juneteenth provides us with a good opportunity to look backward, remember the injustice of slavery, and recognize how strongly the "peculiar institution" of slavery shaped America. It's a good time to read a book or watch a show reflecting some aspect of the African-American experience. You could choose a recent work, non-fiction or fiction, or, for some real insights, you could try a historic or period piece, like a diary or autobiography. There are lots of good ones out there, from formal narratives like Booker T.

Washington's "Up From Slavery" to diaries to transcribed oral histories.

Just to give you a little taste of what some of these are like, here are a few snippets taken from an anthology of oral histories recounted by former slaves, collected by WPA workers during the Great Depression:

"What I like best, freedom or slavery? Well, it's this way: in slavery, I owned nothing, and never owed nothing, and, white man, I didn't know much. In freedom, I owned the home, owe the people, and raise the family. All that causes me worriment. In slavery, I have no worriment, but I take the freedom." (Margrett Nillin)

"Abraham Lincoln was all right. I think slavery was wrong, because birds and things are free, and man ought to have the same privilege." (Sarah Debro)

"I think the time will soon be when people won't be looked on as regards to whether you are black or white, but all on the same equality. I may not live to see it, but it is on the way. Many don't believe it, but I know it." (Delicia Patterson)

"Yes, sir! I sure do come from that old stock who had the misfortune to be slaves, but who decided to be men, at one and the same time, and I'm right proud of it." (George Cato)

"Here's the idea: freedom is worth it all." (Moses Mitchell)

(Quotations adapted from "Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember: An Oral History," edited by James Mellon.)