

JUNETEENTH

A Day of Freedom

The Juneteenth Flag

The Juneteenth flag is rich with symbolism that honors the journey from slavery to freedom:

The Star

A nova bursting on the horizon — representing a new day and a new freedom for Black Americans.

The Arc

The curved line across the center symbolizes a new horizon — a new beginning on the other side of bondage.

Red, White & Blue

The colors honor that enslaved African Americans were always Americans — their freedom is American freedom.

The Date

Sometimes the date, June 19, 1865, is woven into the flag's design to acknowledge the day freedom arrived.



A Trailblazer: Opal Lee — The Grandmother of Juneteenth

Opal Lee was born in 1926 in Marshall, Texas. When she was 12 years old, a white mob burned her family's home to the ground on Juneteenth. Rather than let hatred silence her, she spent the rest of her life fighting to make sure the whole nation would know and honor this day.

For decades, Opal Lee walked 2½ miles every Juneteenth — one mile for each year enslaved people waited after the Emancipation Proclamation before freedom reached them. She walked into her 90s, drawing thousands alongside her, refusing to stop until Juneteenth was a federal holiday.



The Official Proclamation

On June 17, 2021, President Joseph R. Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act into law, making June 19th a federal holiday. Opal Lee stood by his side.



“What we’re trying to get people to understand is that Juneteenth is freedom. And I don’t mean just for Black people, or Texas people. It’s freedom for everybody.”
— Opal Lee

THE ROAD TO JUNETEENTH

1619

The Beginning of American Slavery

The first enslaved Africans arrived in the English colonies at Point Comfort, Virginia. For the next 246 years, millions would be held in bondage on American soil.

Jan. 1,
1863

The Emancipation Proclamation

President Abraham Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring enslaved people in Confederate states legally free. But the Confederacy did not recognize Lincoln's authority and Union troops had not yet reached much of the South. The words were law. The reality was not.

Apr. 9,
1865

The Civil War Ends

Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrenders to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia. The war is over. But in the most remote corners of the South, particularly Texas, the news traveled slowly. And some enslavers chose not to let it travel at all.

June 19,
1865

JUNETEENTH — Freedom Arrives in Texas

Union General Gordon Granger arrives in Galveston, Texas and reads 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." Two-and-a-half years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Freedom finally arrived. The formerly enslaved took to the streets in prayer, song, and celebration.

1866

The First Official Celebration

Freedmen in Texas organize the first official Juneteenth celebration, called "Jubilee Day." Families gathered, prayed, sang, and feasted. Many saved up all year to buy land near where they had been enslaved, just so they could gather and celebrate together.

Late
1800s-
1900s

Suppression and Resilience

As Reconstruction ended and Jim Crow laws took hold, Juneteenth celebrations were pushed out of public spaces. Black communities moved celebrations into churches and onto private land. The tradition survived because the people refused to let it die.

1980

Texas Makes It Official

Texas becomes the first state to declare Juneteenth an official state holiday, led by the efforts of Al Edwards, a Black state legislator who had celebrated freedom day his entire life.

1990s–2000s

A Growing Movement

More states begin recognizing Juneteenth. Opal Lee, a woman from Fort Worth, Texas, begins walking 2.5 miles every Juneteenth to symbolize the 2½ years enslaved people waited for freedom. She would become known as the "Grandmother of Juneteenth."

June 17, 2021

A Federal Holiday Is Born

President Joe Biden signs the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act into law. At 94 years old, Opal Lee was in the room when he signed it. She wept. The holiday was 156 years in the making.

Juneteenth is not just a history lesson. It is a celebration of resilience, a call to truth-telling, and a reminder that freedom is worth fighting for and worth protecting.