

New Jersey's Historical Connection to Juneteenth

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Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day or Emancipation Day, is an annual federal holiday celebrated on June 19. The holiday marks the end of slavery on June 19, 1865, when Union General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas—two years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863—and announced the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of enslaved people. President Joseph R. Biden signed legislation establishing Juneteenth as a federal holiday into law on June 17, 2021. Since the passage of the law, Juneteenth has been observed nationwide as a day of celebration that marks the emancipation of the final enslaved people, and a reminder of the continuing fight against racial discrimination and injustice.

In New Jersey, Juneteenth is celebrated on the third Friday after June 19. This year, residents will commemorate the holiday on Friday, June 20. New Jersey has a significant historical connection to Juneteenth, as it was the last state in the North to abolish slavery. Following the Civil War the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, also known as the Reconstruction Amendments, were passed to address issues relating to slavery and equal rights within the United States. In 1865, New Jersey Governor Joel Parker instructed the state's congressional delegation to reject the ratification of abolishing slavery and indentured servitude nationwide. It wasn't until 1866, when Governor Marcus L. Ward took office, that a New Jersey Constitutional Amendment was signed, fully outlawing slavery within the state.

The history of slavery in New Jersey dates back to 1623, when Dutch settlers brought enslaved Africans to the region, which was then part of New Netherland. After the British defeated the Dutch and took control of the colony in 1664, colonists continued to profit from the transatlantic slave trade. In 1788, New Jersey banned the importation of enslaved people but did not prohibit free individuals of color from migrating and settling in the state.

In 1804, the state passed its Gradual Abolition of Slavery law, which effectively prolonged the end of slavery in New Jersey. The law stipulated that children of enslaved Africans, born after July 4, 1804, would be freed at the age of 21 for women and 25 for men. However, it did not immediately free those already enslaved or those born before that date, effectively prolonging the institution of slavery in the state for many decades. Those not covered by the law remained enslaved until manumitted or escaped.

Until December 1865, sixteen people remained enslaved in the State of New Jersey, six months after the first Juneteenth celebration in Texas. In 2008, New Jersey expressed its official regret and remorse for all the harm caused by slavery within the state. Former Assemblyman William D. Payne introduced a resolution to individuals about the issue of slavery, highlighting the fact that there were approximately 13,000 enslaved Africans in New Jersey in the 1800s.

Juneteenth remains a vital day for celebration and reflection. While it celebrates liberation, it also serves as a reminder of the ongoing fight for racial justice. It is an occasion to celebrate the resilience and determination of those who fought for freedom, and the progress we've made towards a more just and equitable society. As we mark Juneteenth on this important anniversary, we are reminded that the struggle for freedom and equality is not yet over, but we are inspired to continue pushing forward, working together towards a brighter future where all people are treated with dignity and respect.