

CULTURAL  
AWARENESS



# OBSERVANCE

## *National Independence Day*



Juneteenth, officially known as Juneteenth National Independence Day, holds significant importance in the United States. Juneteenth celebrates the end of slavery and freedom for African Americans.

The holiday's name is derived from the combination of "June" and "nineteenth," signifying the date when Major General Gordon Granger issued the final enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation in Texas after the conclusion of the American Civil War.

President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, as the Nation entered the Civil War's 3rd year. The proclamation declared that the 3 million slaves living in the Confederate States were free.

For those who were largely isolated from Union armies, life continued as if the Emancipation Proclamation did not exist. This was the case in Texas, where thousands of slaves were unaware of their declared freedom.

On June 19, 1865—over 2 years after President Lincoln declared enslaved persons free—Major General Gordon Granger and Union Army troops marched into Galveston, Texas, to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation. They freed over 250,000 Black Americans, the last enslaved people in Texas.

Opal Lee is an American retired teacher, counselor, and activist in the movement to make Juneteenth a federally recognized holiday.

On June 19, 1939, at the age of 12, Lee and her family were displaced after her home was burned and destroyed by 500 White rioters in Marshall, Texas. She went on to dedicate her life to becoming a teacher and an activist.

She campaigned for decades to make Juneteenth a holiday. She promoted the idea by leading 2.5-mile walks each year, representing the 2.5 years it took for the Emancipation Proclamation to reach Texas, bringing an end to slavery.

At the age of 89, she conducted a symbolic walk from Fort Worth, from which she departed in September 2016, to Washington, DC, where she arrived in January 2017.

In June 2021, at the age of 94, Lee's efforts succeeded when a bill to make Juneteenth a Federal holiday was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Joe Biden. She was an honored guest at the bill signing ceremony.

In May 2024, Opal Lee was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Nation's highest civilian honor.

On Juneteenth, we renew our commitment to promoting fairness, equal opportunity, and just treatment for all.

