

Juneteenth – National Freedom Day

By

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Juneteenth, observed annually on June 19, is a day of profound historical significance, celebrating the emancipation of enslaved African Americans while also acknowledging the ongoing struggle for racial justice in the United States. Known as Emancipation Day or Freedom Day, Juneteenth commemorates June 19, 1865, when Union Major General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas, and issued General Order No. 3, declaring that all enslaved people in Texas were free. This announcement occurred more than two years after President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, reflecting both the delayed reach of federal authority and the isolation of many enslaved communities in remote Confederate states. The arrival of Granger's troops and the proclamation of freedom marked a turning point in history, granting legal liberation to approximately 250,000 individuals who had been held in bondage.

From the beginning, Juneteenth was not merely a legal declaration but a deeply communal celebration. The first known commemorations occurred in 1866 in Texas, where newly freed individuals gathered to share food, sing spirituals, dance, pray, and tell stories of bondage and resilience. Over time, Juneteenth celebrations spread beyond Texas, following African Americans who migrated to other regions of the country, particularly during the Great Migration of the early 20th century. In each new city, the holiday served both as a celebration of freedom and as a reaffirmation of Black identity, culture, and community cohesion. The holiday evolved to include parades, family reunions, barbecues, rodeos, and educational events, combining celebrations with civic engagement and reflection.

The meaning of Juneteenth has expanded over time. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Juneteenth gained renewed attention as activists and community leaders highlighted the ongoing struggle for racial equality and justice. For many African Americans, Juneteenth became a "second Independence Day," celebrating both emancipation and continued resistance to systemic oppression. Its modern recognition has grown into a platform for education, reflection, and policy engagement, emphasizing both historical awareness and contemporary social justice.

At the national level, Juneteenth achieved formal recognition as a federal holiday on June 17, 2021, when President Joe Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act (H.R. 1320) into law. The bill was introduced by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX-18),

with bipartisan support from Senators including John Cornyn, Ed Markey, Dick Durbin, and Tammy Duckworth. The legislation formally designates June 19 as Juneteenth National Independence Day, acknowledging the day's historical significance, celebrating Black culture, and promoting national awareness of racial injustice and the ongoing struggle for equality.

Juneteenth's significance is equally robust at the local level, particularly in Santa Clara County, California, where communities and institutions have embraced the holiday through decades of recognition, celebration, and policy initiatives. In September 2020, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution establishing Juneteenth as a paid county holiday for county employees, making Santa Clara County the first in California to do so. The Board also allocated a \$2.3 million reserve to support this paid holiday, reflecting a tangible commitment to honoring historical freedom while promoting equity and recognition in county governance.

Santa Clara County's Juneteenth recognition has roots in decades of grassroots community celebration. The African American Community Service Agency (AACSA) has been organizing Juneteenth events for 40 years, most prominently through the *Juneteenth in the Streets Festival* in San José. These festivals are multifaceted, emphasizing education, culture, and economic empowerment. They provide a platform for Black-owned businesses, highlight artistic and musical traditions, and foster a sense of unity and shared purpose. By celebrating Juneteenth in a communal setting, the AACSA and similar organizations embed the holiday into the lived experiences of Santa Clara County residents, creating intergenerational connections and shared civic identity.

Educational institutions in the county have also embraced Juneteenth. On June 9, 2021, the Santa Clara County Board of Education (SCCOE) unanimously passed a resolution formally recognizing June 19 as Juneteenth. The resolution emphasized the day's significance for teaching historical awareness, understanding racial trauma, and advancing equity within schools. In June 2024, the SCCOE reaffirmed its commitment by adopting Resolution No. 2442-1, authored and adopted by Board President Berta, Vice-President Rocha, and Trustees Chon, Di Salvo, Lari, Mah, and Sreerishnan, once again officially recognizing Juneteenth as a day of reflection, education, and celebration.

Santa Clara County's recognition extends beyond holidays and formal resolutions. In June 2020, the Juvenile Justice Commission issued a statement honoring Juneteenth, linking it to systemic inequities, and calling for community investment, reform, and empowerment. The statement highlights that recognition of Juneteenth is not only celebratory but also a tool for social accountability, ensuring that the legacy of slavery and its continued consequences inform policy and community engagement.

Local institutions also participate in education and outreach on Juneteenth. The San José Public Library closes its branches on June 19 and organizes programming that highlights the history and cultural significance of Juneteenth, including lectures, story time, and curated materials for students and community members.)

Taken together, these examples demonstrate how Juneteenth has grown from its origins in Galveston, Texas, to become a living, recognized holiday with national, state, and local dimensions. In Santa Clara County, recognition spans policy (paid holiday), education (SCCOE resolutions), community celebration (AACSA festival), civic engagement (Juvenile Justice Commission statement), and public programming (library events). This layered approach ensures that the legacy of emancipation remains visible, relevant, and actionable.

Juneteenth's significance lies in its dual capacity to celebrate freedom and confront injustice. While commemorating the emancipation of enslaved African Americans, the holiday simultaneously calls attention to systemic inequities, reminding communities that true freedom requires active engagement, recognition, and repair. In Santa Clara County, Juneteenth serves as both a historical observance and a contemporary commitment to education, justice, and unity. By integrating celebration with civic responsibility, the county ensures that Juneteenth is a meaningful, lived experience for all residents, reinforcing the ongoing journey toward racial equality.

In conclusion, Juneteenth is not just a historic date, it is a living tradition, a catalyst for education, and a vehicle for civic engagement. The national celebration, combined with robust recognition in Santa Clara County, exemplifies how local communities can honor history while advancing equity and understanding. Through institutional recognition, grassroots celebration, and educational outreach, Juneteenth continues to inspire reflection, resilience, and hope for future generations.