Juneteenth, America’s 11th Federal Holiday

- KidsPost Reprint: “Juneteenth: An emancipation celebration”
- Post Graphics Reprint: “America’s long and uneven march from slavery to freedom | Juneteenth”
- Post Reprint: “Meet Opal Lee, the 94-year-old activist who marched for miles to make Juneteenth a federal holiday”
- Student Activity: A New Federal Holiday
- Student Activity: How Does a Day Become a Federal Holiday?
- Student Activity: Historic Context: The Choices of Writers and Editors
- Teachers Notes: More Ways to Convey Lessons
From D.C. to Federal Holiday

When Ulysses S. Grant was president the first four congressionally designated federal holidays were created. Congressional action granted paid time off to federal workers in the District of Columbia for New Year’s Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

“In 1870, when Congress passed the first federal holiday law, the federal government employed approximately 5,300 workers in Washington, D.C., and another approximately 50,600 around the country,” according to the Congressional Research Service. “The distinction between federal employees working in the District of Columbia and those elsewhere proved important because the initial holiday act only applied to the federal workforce in Washington, D.C. Federal employees in other parts of the country did not receive holiday benefits until at least 1885, as federal holidays were initially interpreted as only applying to federal workers in the District of Columbia.”

Over the years, seven more federal holidays were added to reflect the values of the American people. George Washington had proclaimed a day for thanksgiving on October 3, 1789, but until Abraham Lincoln in 1863 — in response to a letter from Sarah Josepha Hale, the 74-year-old editor of Godey’s Lady’s Book who had sought a fixed date for observance for 15 years — proclaimed that “fellow citizens in every part of the United States … to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens,” there was no established national day to observe it.

Another woman of conviction, Opal Lee, spent years advocating for national recognition and establishment of a federal holiday — Juneteenth. It had taken two and a half years for emancipation to reach Galveston, Texas. Many miles were traveled by the formerly enslaved people to find loved ones, to participate in the Great Migration and to celebrate Juneteenth in church-owned property and parks. Celebration turned to yearning for more. As she grew older, Opal Lee continued marching 2½ miles morning and afternoon advocating for official recognition of Juneteenth. Congress responded in 2021, creating the 11th federal holiday.
Juneteenth: An emancipation celebration
On June 19, 1865, Union troops freed enslaved people in Texas, the last Confederate state forced to do so.

By Haben Kelati

For many Black Americans, July Fourth is not the most important holiday celebrating freedom. On June 19, 1865, Major General Gordon Granger announced to the town of Galveston, Texas, that all enslaved people were to be freed. June 19, or Juneteenth as it’s most commonly known, became the most celebrated emancipation day for Black people across the United States.

Melissa Stuckey is an assistant professor at Elizabeth City State University in North Carolina who teaches African American history. Below she explains this special day’s beginnings and traditions throughout history:

The last state emancipation day
Texas was the last Confederate state to have slavery abolished. During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all enslaved people living in states that had joined the Confederacy, on January 1, 1863. But he had no power to free those in Confederate states, which had their own president, Jefferson Davis.

Enslaved people gradually became free as Union troops defeated Confederate troops in those states during the next two years. “Florida has its own emancipation day,” Stuckey said, “but Juneteenth is special because it’s the last one.” (Slavery did not end in all border and Union states until the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in December 1865.)

Announcement based on proclamation
It is often mistakenly said that Granger read the Emancipation Proclamation to announce enslaved people’s freedom in Galveston. “The statement [Granger read] is based on the Emancipation Proclamation,” Stuckey said.

Granger’s proclamation asked that enslaved people stay on the plantations and transition to becoming paid employees. “Gordon Granger’s intention was to keep things stable,” Stuckey said. But freedom means doing what you want. “As [formerly enslaved people] became free, they immediately started to do things that marked freedom for them,” she said. This included leaving to find family members who had escaped or been forced to leave the plantation because White owners had sold or moved them to other properties.

Churches buy land for celebrations
In the 19th-century Southern United States, churches were the center of the Black community and supported African Americans in a racist society. “Even as slavery is ending, a culture of separation, segregation, is growing. Part of that is about the public space and who gets to use it,” Stuckey said.

Churches bought land for the Black community to use that would be the sites of emancipation celebrations. One example is Emancipation Park in Houston, Texas, which still hosts Juneteenth celebrations.

Children were the focus of the fest
Early Juneteenth celebrations focused on celebrating Black children through baby contests or having children pose for photos. “They were children of freedom. It was really important to their parents and grandparents to really celebrate that they now had generations of children who were not enslaved people,” Stuckey said.

Despite holiday, racism continues
Beginning in the 1930s, Juneteenth was commercialized with people buying things and going places to celebrate. Many businesses — such as amusement parks — that usually excluded Black people, would be open to them on Juneteenth. “People begin to start thinking critically during this time, where we are segregated and or excluded except one day of the year and that’s the day African Americans celebrate freedom,” Stuckey said.

In the years leading up to the civil rights movement, Juneteenth celebrations became less popular and shifted to being about demanding equality.

— June 15, 2021
On June 19, 1865, Union Army Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger stepped onto a balcony in Galveston, Tex. — two months after the Civil War had ended — and announced that more than 250,000 enslaved people in Texas were free. President Abraham Lincoln had freed them two and a half years earlier in his Emancipation Proclamation, but since Texas never fell to Union troops in battle, they’d remained in bondage.

The newly emancipated responded with cries of joy and prayers of gratitude — a celebration that became known as Juneteenth. Black Texans marked the day each year with parades and picnics, music and fine clothes. The gatherings grew through the aborted promise of Reconstruction, through racial terror and Jim Crow, and through the Great Depression, with a major revival in the 1980s and 1990s.

Last summer, amid the racial-justice protests following the murder of George Floyd, millions of White Americans became aware of Juneteenth for the first time. Some companies announced they would give employees the day off on Juneteenth, and momentum grew to make it a national holiday.

On Tuesday, the Senate voted unanimously to do just that. The House moved quickly Wednesday to pass the bill, approving the measure in a 415-to-14 vote.

On Thursday [June 17] President Biden signed the bill in the East Room.

But why celebrate nationally something that happened in a single state? Why not Dec. 18, the day in 1865 the 13th Amendment was proclaimed and the last enslaved people in the United States were freed? Or Jan. 1, the day in 1863 that Lincoln made his momentous proclamation, setting a course for the nation from which it could not retreat?

Why Juneteenth? Not only because “all the major currents of American history flow through Texas” — as Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Annette Gordon-Reed writes in her new book, “On Juneteenth” — but also because, as Black Texans moved across the country, they brought their day of jubilation with them. And embracing that moment has become a fitting way to mark the end of a war fought to preserve slavery.
Emancipation Proclamation
Jan. 1, 1863

On Jan. 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln declared enslaved people in the Confederacy forever free — though slavery remained in effect on the ground. States loyal to the Union were exempt, as were Union-controlled parts of Louisiana, Virginia and Tennessee, but many enslaved people in those areas escaped to effective freedom as early as May 1861. In New Jersey, a gradual abolition law passed in 1804 — so gradual that the 1860 U.S. Census counted 18 people as “slaves.” The state government called them “apprentices for life.” Congress abolished slavery in the District of Columbia on April 16, 1862.

End of the Civil War
April 9, 1865

Enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation generally followed battle lines, encompassing all of the Confederacy except Texas by the end of the war. Four states abolished slavery by state action before the end of the war: Maryland (Nov. 1, 1864), Missouri (Jan. 11, 1865), the new state of West Virginia (effective Feb. 3, 1865) and Tennessee (Feb. 22, 1865).

13th Amendment
Dec. 18, 1865

On June 19, 1865, in Galveston, Tex., Granger issued General Order No. 3, freeing all enslaved people in Texas, in accordance with the Emancipation Proclamation issued two and a half years earlier. The 13th Amendment banning slavery was officially proclaimed on Dec. 18, 1865, after enough states had ratified it on Dec. 6. By then, the only enslaved people waiting to be freed were in Delaware, Kentucky and New Jersey.

ABOVE: Oya Kali Tsunami teaches a group of children the meaning of Juneteenth in 1999 in Los Angeles.

LEFT: Youths wait to perform in a talent show during Juneteenth events in Burlington, Iowa, in 2005.

BELOW: Celebrants in 1993 in Atlanta. While the Juneteenth commemoration originated in Texas, it has come to more broadly symbolize the end of slavery in the United States — and, as of this week, June 19 is officially a federal holiday.
RETROPOLIS

Meet Opal Lee, the 94-year-old activist who marched for miles to make Juneteenth a federal holiday

By Meryl Kornfield

Originally Published June 18, 2021

In 2016, civil rights leader Opal Lee, then 89, laced up her sneakers for the 1,400-mile trek from her home in Fort Worth to Washington, D.C., hoping to ask President Barack Obama to make Juneteenth a national holiday.

But she wasn’t sure she would be let into the White House.

“You could save me a lot of shoe leather and a lot of wear and tear on an old body by saying how soon you can see me,” she wrote to Obama. She made national headlines, earned a credit in the film “Miss Juneteenth” and gained more than 1.6 million signatures on a petition to mark the holiday.
However, it wasn’t until this week that Lee, called the “Grandmother of Juneteenth,” finally witnessed the moment she had worked and walked to achieve. On Thursday, President Biden signed legislation establishing a new federal holiday commemorating the end of slavery, with Lee, now 94, beside him.

“You’re an incredible woman, Ms. Opal,” Biden told her at a ceremony in the White House. Along with Vice President Harris, Biden praised Lee’s efforts, kneeling next to her before joking she was 49.

Biden spoke about Juneteenth 1939, when a mob of 500 white supremacists set fire to Lee’s childhood home. Lee, just 12, and her family fled.

“Such hate never stopped her,” Biden said.

“Over the course of decades, she’s made it her mission to see that this day came,” he continued. “It was almost a singular mission. She’s walked miles and miles, literally and figuratively, to bring attention to Juneteenth.”

Growing up in Marshall, Tex., Lee said the day was treated like other holidays, with food, music and baseball games.

“It was pure festival,” she told CNN.

Lee merely wanted to share the holiday, widely recognized by the Black community in her state, with the rest of the country, she had said, as some states had not yet formally acknowledged the historic day.

“I just thought if a little, old lady in tennis shoes was out there walking, somebody would take notice,” she told NPR at the time.

Like a scene from the movie “Forrest Gump,” Lee was joined by others during her march, some carrying signs cheering her on. After friends worried for her health, Lee did not walk the full distance but rather traveled to cities that had invited her to join their Juneteenth celebrations.

“I went to Shreveport and Texarkana, Little Rock and Fort Smith, Denver and Colorado Springs,” she told Variety. “I went to Madison, Wis., Milwaukee, Atlanta, the Carolinas. I was all over the place.”

At each spot, she strode 2½ miles in the morning and in the afternoon, paying homage to the emancipated enslaved people in Texas who didn’t know they were free for that many years.

Every year on June 19, she continued to walk 2½ miles, raising awareness about what the day meant.

After George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police in May 2020, Lee saw a nation galvanized. The month after Floyd died, millions across the country marked the holiday, prompting Lee to believe that change could come.

“We can’t let the swell of support just simply disappear until the summer rolls around again,” she wrote in the petition that was quickly gaining signatures. “We have (to) make sure Congress follows through with their commitment to honor the lives of those who came before us.”

This week, Congress answered her call, as the House joined the Senate in overwhelmingly supporting the legislation Wednesday.

Lee, watching on a laptop screen from her Fort Worth home, whooped, juggled her legs and threw up her arms like a runner passing the finish line. ■

— July 9, 2020
A New Federal Holiday


Read “Juneteenth: An emancipation celebration,” “America’s long and uneven march from slavery to freedom: Juneteenth” and “Meet Opal Lee, the 94-year-old activist who marched for miles to make Juneteenth a federal holiday.” Use the articles and informational graphics to respond to the following questions.

1. When was the Emancipation Proclamation issued? What was Abraham Lincoln’s purpose in issuing it?

2. Why were enslaved people not free in the Confederate states after the Emancipation Proclamation?

3. What announcement did Major General Gordon Granger make in Galveston, Texas, on June 19, 1865?
   a. What events took place before this day and after this day in 1865?
   b. What is Juneteenth’s significance in U.S. history?

4. Assistant professor Stuckey indicated Granger’s intentions when he informed Galveston.
   a. What were they?
   b. Approximately how many enslaved people resided in Texas?
   c. What was the response of the formerly enslaved people?

5. What role did churches play in Black communities in the 19th century?

6. Using informational graphics — line graphs, charts and maps — is another way of relating historic and current information. Using the key and text, summarize what each of the three maps communicates to readers:
   a. Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863
   b. End of the Civil War, April 9, 1865
   c. 13th Amendment, December 18, 1865

7. By whom and where was Juneteenth observed in the years since 1865?

8. Opal Lee is an example of one person making a difference.
   a. Why is Juneteenth 1939 significant in her life?
   b. How did she begin calling attention to Juneteenth? Why?
   c. What is the symbolism in her 2½-mile walks in the morning and afternoon?

9. Opal Lee is called the “Grandmother of Juneteenth.”
   a. In addition to walking and participating in Juneteenth celebrations around the U.S., what actions did the “Grandmother of Juneteenth” take?
   b. What other factors coalesced to gain Congress’s support for and passage of the legislation to create a federal holiday?

10. Answer the question that is asked about creating this federal holiday: Why Juneteenth?
How Does a Day Become a Federal Holiday?

1. What is a federal holiday?

2. At the beginning of 2021, the U.S. had ten paid federal holidays. How many of these can you name?
   a.
   b.
   c.
   d.
   e.
   f.
   g.
   h.
   i.
   j.

3. Are states required to observe the federal holidays? For example, does your community observe all ten federal holidays? If not, why do you think one or more are not observed?

4. Think about the holidays where you live. May states add additional holidays? Can you name any other special holidays celebrated in your community?

5. Why would Columbus Day be observed with different kinds of activities or not be observed?

6. Public holidays and a day of mourning may be declared by presidential proclamation. The president explains to the public why the country should take time to observe an event or person. No businesses are required to close. Can you think of a time when a public holiday or a day of mourning by presidential proclamation was observed?

7-8. Federal holidays reflect the values, history and culture of a country. Select another country to research what federal or national holidays are celebrated there. What do two or more of these holidays reflect of that country’s society?

9. Select one of the U.S.’s federal holidays. What does this holiday reflect about America’s history, values and/or culture?

10. If you could proclaim a state holiday or a holiday for your community, what would it recognize? Give details to explain your choice.

Extra Credit.
   a. What is its relationship to federal holidays?
   b. What was the question that faced the courts?
   c. What were the decisions of the courts, including the Supreme Court?
Historic Context: The Choices of Writers and Editors

Journalists have used their academic studies, research, interviews and eyewitness experiences to provide historic context to their coverage. It provides the necessary background. This may be for a 5W-and-H news story or one that requires more depth. Writers and editors confer to decide what readers need to understand the reporting and make decisions: What are the details that surround an event? What themes and patterns apply? What social attitudes, economic conditions and political views existed at a certain time?

*The coverage of the creation of a new federal holiday illustrates this approach.*

Be Informed

1. Respond to the following questions after reading “America’s long and uneven march from slavery to freedom | Juneteenth.”
   a. The introductory text is composed of seven paragraphs. Summarize the 156 years that are quickly covered in each of the first five paragraphs.
   b. In what way is the third paragraph a “turning point”? What is the effect of the one-sentence fifth paragraph?
   c. A simple line graph conveys key information of this story. In what way is it a useful tool?
   d. Three maps and accompanying text provide more details. What historical context does each provide?
   e. What part of the Juneteenth story is told through the photographs?

What happens when an online interactive covers the same topic as the print edition?

2. Read “Juneteenth” and respond to the following questions.
   a. Read the introductory text.
      In what ways is the online version different from the seven-paragraph print one?
   b. An online format allows for links to previous coverage. Are the links in the introductory text helpful or distracting? Explain with an example.
   c. In what way do the photographs tell the story?
   d. In what way is the line graphic interactive with the maps?
   e. Editor’s Picks appear at the end of the Juneteenth online coverage. Did you read any of these?
      If yes, what drew you to them? If no, why did you not read more of the historic context?

If your school has access to the e-Replica format Washington Post, this activity will include a third example, the printed page as it was originally published. Read and analyze the text (writers’ choices), images and layout (editors’ choices) to convey the beginning and current celebration of Juneteenth.
Historic Context: The Choices of Writers and Editors \ 1 continued

Compare and Contrast Print and Online Editions
3. Listen to the drumline as you scroll through the photographs from 1908 to 2008. What does the addition of sound and music add to the mood of the article?

4. Is it easier to read the maps in the print format or in the online format with rolling text relating the historic changes?

Evaluate Effectiveness
5. Select one of the following topics. Write an evaluation of different aspects of providing historic context in print and online reporting.
   a. The effectiveness of each format to convey basic information
   b. The choices writers and editors make when considering space available and their readers — what must be included and what can be deleted?
   c. Use of informational graphics, photographs and text to create a multi-media/interactive presentation of a past event
   d. The benefit and the downside of using links in online storytelling
   e. Juxtaposition of photographs from different time periods, photographs in chronological order, and/or photographs in black and white vs. color
   f. Telling the story more than once: In text, again in maps, again in photographs
Juneteenth
Teachers may wish to pair KidsPost “Juneteenth: An emancipation celebration” with the KidsPost article, “Black History Month: Understanding the Emancipation Proclamation.” Teachers of older students may expand the historic context with a political science professor’s analysis, “The Emancipation Proclamation did not end slavery. Here’s what did.”

An interactive online companion to the reprinted KidsPost and other Juneteenth articles is “The joy of Juneteenth: America’s long and uneven march from slavery to freedom.”
https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/interactive/2021/juneteenth-history-texas-emancipation-photos/

Discussion could include the use of graphics, photographs and text to create a multi-media presentation of a past event. See the handout Historic Context: The Choices of Writers and Editors for a comparison/contrast and evaluation exercise. Note that six topics are suggested in question 5. Teachers may wish to add other topics based on your curriculum. This activity illustrates additional ways to use articles in this guide and online. Journalism, broadcast journalism and technology teachers, in conjunction with teachers from other disciplines, might have students use this as a model for creating an interactive online informative piece.

Federal Holidays
For more detailed information on the U.S. federal holidays, visit Congressional Research Service document “Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices that was updated on July 1, 2021.
https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R41990.pdf

In 1880, George Washington’s Birthday was included. In 1885, Congress extended holiday coverage for some holidays to all federal employees. Although Thanksgiving Day was included in the first holiday bill of 1870, it was not until 1941 that Congress specifically designated the fourth Thursday of November as the official date. Since 1888, Congress has added seven federal holidays, creating Decoration Day (now Memorial Day) in 1888, Labor Day in 1894, Armistice Day (now Veterans Day) in 1938, Inauguration Day in 1957 (quadrennially and only celebrated in the District of Columbia), Columbus Day in 1968, Martin Luther King Jr.’s Birthday in 1983, and Juneteenth in 2021. In 1954, Armistice Day was broadened to honor Americans who fought in World War II and the Korean conflict, and the name of the holiday was changed to Veterans Day. In 1968, the Uniform Monday Holiday Act was enacted to “provide for uniform annual observances” of Washington’s Birthday, Memorial Day, and Veterans Day. Additionally, the Monday Holiday Law established Columbus Day to be celebrated on the second Monday in October. In 1975, Veterans Day celebrations were returned to November 11 by Congress.

On June 28, 1870, the first federal holidays were established for federal employees in the District of Columbia. Apparently drafted in response to a memorial drafted by local “bankers and business men,” the June 28 act provided that New Year’s Day, Independence Day, Christmas Day, and “any day appointed or recommended by the President of the United States as a day of public fasting or thanksgiving [were] to be holidays within the District [of Columbia].”

This legislation was drafted “to correspond with similar laws of States around the District,” and “in every State of the Union.”
TULSA RACE MASSACRE
The Tulsa Race Massacre sidebar in this curriculum guide provides online resources, some from Oklahoma history groups, others from news organizations and history-focused programs. They give teachers an opportunity for students to explore for
a. The same information included; others with discoveries to add to the story
b. Use of original sources, photographs and documents. The search to find them.
c. Themes
d. Focus on the past, updating to the present — the people and place
e. Current concerns, one hundred years later
f. Compare and contrast role of narrator, images and time — chronological or otherwise

YOU and YOUR RIGHTS
If teachers of younger students would prefer to focus on an example of freedom of the student press, do a “What Would You Do?” activity. Visit the situation related on the Student Press Law Center website: “Arkansas high school physically cuts out pages of published yearbook before distributing.”

The examples of majority and dissenting opinions on two 2021 cases were found in “Supreme Court Case Quick Updates” on the ABA website. In addition to case summaries, links are provided to the Court Decision on each case. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/criminal_justice/resources/case_updates/

POST PRESENTED FOUR EDWARD R. MURROW AWARDS
In August editors shared the good news of receiving four Edward R. Murrow awards in the Large Digital News Organization category. Media Arts, broadcast journalism, journalism and teachers of history, ethics, psychology, women’s studies and cross-disciplinary classes may find the content and the technical approaches useful for discussion and instruction.

3. Writing. Lee Powell, for his weaving together of “words, pictures and natural sound to document what it felt like to fly commercially at the height of the pandemic” https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/lee-powell/
4. Sports. Opinions video, Bob Costas and Kenny Stills on NFL’s ban on national anthem protests https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qStUqjyscsM

INDEX TO PREVIOUS TOPICS
The September 2019 NIE curriculum guide, Three Months, 18 Years — Post Resources for You — includes an index to previous topics. Review them. You may find just the right activity and readings for your students.

CONTRIBUTE
If you have photographs of your students working on any of the suggestions in this month’s curriculum guide, send them to nie@washpost.com. Be sure to provide the name of the school, address and contact information to reach you.
If you are interested in writing a lesson for future Washington Post NIE curriculum guides, contact the guide editor, Carol Lange, at nie@washpost.com. Please indicate your teaching experience, subject and grade levels you teach as well as contact information.