

RUTLAND HERALD

Editorial: Juneteenth

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Celebrated on June 19 each year, Juneteenth holds profound significance in American history as a day commemorating the emancipation of enslaved African Americans. In 2021, it became our newest national holiday. Its importance lies not only in its historical context but in its relevance to contemporary discussions on race, equality and social justice. To truly appreciate Juneteenth is to understand its historical roots, its cultural impact, and its significance in the ongoing struggle for civil rights.

Juneteenth traces its origins to June 19, 1865, when Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, arrived in Galveston, Texas, and announced the end of slavery. This proclamation came two and a half years after President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which had declared the freedom of slaves in Confederate states. Scholars say the delayed arrival of the news to Texas highlights the challenges of communication and enforcement during the tumultuous post-Civil War period. For newly freed African Americans, Juneteenth symbolized liberation and marked the beginning of their journey towards equality and full citizenship.

Today, June 19 is also known as Emancipation Day, Jubilee Day, Black Independence Day or Freedom Day. In Vermont, the country's second-whitest state (93.8%, behind Maine's 93.8%), communities honor the holiday with celebrations or events. Many towns and cities use the month to honor Juneteenth.

For sure, the significance of Juneteenth extends beyond its historical roots. It serves as a celebration of African American culture, resilience and community. Through traditions such as music, dance, food and storytelling, larger Juneteenth festivals across the United States foster a sense of unity and heritage among the BIPOC community. These celebrations not only honor the struggles of the past but also emphasize the ongoing quest for equality and justice in contemporary society.

Notably, Juneteenth serves as a reminder of the ongoing challenges faced by African Americans in their pursuit of civil rights. Despite the abolition of slavery, African Americans continued to face systemic racism, segregation and discrimination throughout the Jim Crow era and beyond. Juneteenth serves as a necessary call to action to address these injustices and to strive toward a more inclusive and equitable society.

As we have noted in this space, in recent years, Juneteenth has gained renewed attention and significance amid growing awareness of racial inequality and police brutality in the United States. The Black Lives Matter movement, sparked by the killings of African Americans such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and George Floyd, has underscored the urgent need for racial justice and systemic reform. Juneteenth has become a rallying point for protests, marches and advocacy efforts aimed at ending police violence and addressing racial disparities in the criminal justice system.

Closer to home, as of June, 150 Vermont cities and towns — home to more than 77% of the state's population — had adopted the Vermont Declaration of Inclusion to ensure all residents visitors and people considering moving to their community feel welcome, safe and that they belong. That is a powerful step toward equity, and addressing systemic problems not just for the BIPOC community but for vulnerable communities across Vermont. (Additional information on the Vermont Declaration of Inclusion may be found at vtdeclarationofinclusion.org.)

The recognition of Juneteenth as a federal holiday in 2021 marked a significant milestone in acknowledging the historical and cultural importance of this day. By designating Juneteenth as a national holiday, the United States affirmed its commitment to recognizing and honoring the contributions and struggles of African Americans throughout history. But there continues to be work to be done.

Understanding Juneteenth requires acknowledging and confronting the uncomfortable truths of America's past, including the legacy of slavery, systemic racism, and the enduring impact of inequality on African American communities. At many levels, even here in Vermont, that still is met with reluctance. We believe this holiday calls upon individuals and institutions to educate themselves about the history of slavery and its aftermath, to listen to the voices of African Americans and the BIPOC community, and to actively participate in efforts to dismantle racism and promote social justice.

Simply put: It invites individuals of all backgrounds to reflect on the principles of freedom, equality and justice that are fundamental to the American ideal. It challenges us to confront injustice wherever it exists and to work toward creating a society where every person is treated with dignity, respect and fairness.

It is so simple and yet so complex. The day is a symbol of resilience and hope, but a stark reminder of the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality.

Let's use this day to affirm our commitment to confronting the injustices of the past and building a more just and inclusive future for all.