



Juneteenth: A Personal Reflection

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I'm happy that the knowledge of Juneteenth finally is being acknowledged by companies, news media, churches and other organizations. It is easy to find information about this holiday, but I worry that some might miss the real lesson behind Juneteenth.

Juneteenth is commonly described as a celebration of the end of slavery. Of course, if you have done any research, you recognize that the Emancipation Proclamation did not end slavery. On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation which declared "that all persons held as slaves within the rebellious states are, and henceforward shall be free." Therefore, that left many enslaved people who did not live in states that were in rebellion, without freedom. However, Texas was a huge state and news traveled very slowly. Enslavers took advantage of the communication difficulties by deciding that they wouldn't let the enslaved people know that they were free. They wanted to take advantage of free labor as long as they could. The scarce number of Union troops made enforcement of the proclamation difficult. Even though the Civil War was officially over in April 1865, it wasn't until General Gordon Granger went to Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865 to proclaim that all enslaved people in Texas were free. It wasn't until December 6, 1865, that the 13th Amendment was ratified which abolished slavery in all of the United States and territories.

As a child, I had the opportunity to attend a Juneteenth celebration in Beaumont, Texas, where my grandparents lived. My family and I enjoyed watching a parade and attending a cookout in the countryside. The day ended with our family's story about my great-great-grandfather, Amos Brackeen, who was born on May 1, 1833 in Tennessee, the son of enslaved parents. While we know many details of his life, we have found the names of his parents and grandparents but have no other information about their lives.

Amos was fortunate to remain with his family during his enslavement. His family's enslaver was aware that Tennessee was divided about its decision to remain with the United States or join the Confederacy. There was a strong anti-slavery sentiment which worried the enslaver. Not wanting to take a chance that he would lose his livelihood should Tennessee decide to remain with the United States, he moved his family and enslaved African Americans to Howland, Texas where he was assured that he would be able to keep his laborers under the bondage of enslavement. Unfortunately for Amos, this meant two and a half years of being legally free but still enslaved.

We should remember that though many African American Texans celebrated the fact that the promise of the Emancipation Proclamation finally reached them, they took time to remember the two and a half or more years stolen from them. As with many laws today, many enslavers chose to

ignore the law. When some freed African Americans tried to leave and begin their new lives, they were beaten and were physically returned to their former enslavers. Some were offered a chance to work on the land as sharecroppers but were paid so little and overcharged for any goods that they needed. Life for them wasn't not much different from their years of enslavement.

Amos's story had a happier ending. He was given a small parcel of land in exchange for two and a half years of free labor. He was then able to reap the benefits of his own labor and became a farmer and prosperous landowner of over 200 acres. He married three times and through these unions fathered 19 children. I am the descent of one of these children, Samuel Amos Brackeen, my great-grandfather. Amos died on October 6, 1915 and is buried in the Brackeen family plot in Howland, Texas.