

The Journeys to “Juneteenth”: 150 Years Running

by Eric Wilson

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A shorter version of this essay was originally published for RHS on June 19, 2018, to commemorate “Juneteenth,” the holiday honoring the emancipation of the Confederacy’s last slaves in Galveston, TX, on June 19, 1865. The version below was published in the journal of the Historical Society of Western Virginia, Vol. 23.1 (2018).

Over the course of the past year, the Rockbridge Historical Society has taken cues from the calendar to publish a series of articles and media posts that reflect on a run of different holidays. In spotlighting these communal traditions, we have an opportunity -- as history often and usefully provides -- to think about our present communities and values.

And we can also appreciate more fully how our communities and commemorations have evolved across time. We can consider how they have varied across a range of local, national, sometimes international contexts. Among those we’ve recently explored: Lee-Jackson Day and Martin Luther King Jr. Day; May Day; International Women’s Day; Memorial Day; Flag Day; Armistice/Veterans Day; Hanukkah; Christmas and other ethnic or religious holidays that have come with four centuries of immigration to Rockbridge, to Virginia, and to the United States.

This essay’s journey into “Juneteenth” will take a more sustained run at the origins, commemorative traditions, and currency of this holiday that continues to grow across the country, within our state’s distinct history, and here within our county.



Photo: National Park Service, Juneteenth at Booker T. Washington Monument, 2015

In 2015, on the 150th anniversary of Juneteenth at Booker T. Washington National Monument, Living History Guild volunteers interpreted the day that Washington famously recounts in his memoir, Up From Slavery: his foundational boyhood memory when a Union officer arrived to read the Emancipation Proclamation at the Burroughs plantation in Franklin County. As Washington later noted, the day's sudden change brought new freedoms and new challenges to the enslaved community who had labored and lived there.

The 2015 anniversary featured speakers, gospel music, demonstrations of traditional crafts and historic foodways, a spirited, collective commemoration of the wholesale release of approximately 4 million people of African descent from the bonds of slavery. More particularly, living history re-enactments that day brought to dramatic life the very moment when freedom came to the enslaved men, women and children at the Burroughs Plantation where Booker T. Washington was born. Washington remembered the great day of emancipation, vividly and personally. He said his mother was “standing by my side, leaned over and kissed her children while tears of joy ran down her cheeks. She explained to us what it all meant, that this was the day which she had been so long praying for, but fearing that she would never live to see.”

Mid-June now annually witnesses a run of commemorations surrounding Juneteenth -- sometimes known as Emancipation Day-- the holiday broadly

celebrating the end of American slavery. Though community calendars vary in the observance, the holiday has conventionally centered on June 19, when the last Confederate slaves were finally freed in Galveston, TX in 1865. There, Gen. Robert Granger finally read General Orders No. 3, noting that “in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, ‘all slaves are free.’” [for a fuller accounting, see:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1865/07/07/archives/from-texas-important-orders-by-general-granger-surrender-of-senator.html>]

That terminal landmark, June 19, arrived two and a half months after Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Gen. Ulysses Grant, with President Abraham Lincoln assassinated just days later. Notably, the most common date for such celebrations has not turned to January 1, the date that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation took nominal effect, over a full two and a half years before in 1863. Given the Executive Order’s restrictions as a ‘war powers’ act, the full abolition of slavery would not take broad, legal effect until the Thirteenth Amendment had been passed by Congress on January 31, 1865 and ratified by the states in December of that year (Mississippi only ratified it in 1995).

Crucial as these executive and legislative steps were, Lincoln’s Proclamation was not a single-stroke act, as conventional memory and classroom lessons tend to simplify. Rather, it served as a wartime measure that only freed slaves in territories that had come under the control of Union forces. Hence, the rolling wave of ‘practical liberation’ that gradually ground its way through the battlefields, in various and shifting directions, before finally concluding in Texas.

More uniquely, Congress finally passed the Compensated Emancipation Act on April 16, 1862, formally abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia and compensating owners \$300 for each freed person (the freed men and women, themselves, received no compensation). Accordingly, the District of Columbia now recognizes April 16 as “Emancipation Day,” a full civic holiday in the District, with closure of local government offices -- unlike most political observances of Juneteenth -- and a range of events programmed across the capital.

Across the Potomac, Virginia is now one of 45 states that have officially passed some kind of formal measure recognizing Juneteenth. Though specific dates of observance vary among states, the Commonwealth of Virginia officially designates “Juneteenth Freedom Day” as the third Saturday in June, rather than fixing on the consensus of June 19, or highlighting the unique circumstances of April 9, the state’s effective date of emancipation, effected by the surrender at Appomattox. It should also be noted, however, that in the late nineteenth century, Richmond’s black community often celebrated Emancipation Days twice a year: on both January 1, and April 3, the date when U.S. Colored Troops led the Union Army into Richmond to liberate the city, thus emancipating the enslaved people still resident there.

Passed in 2007 to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the first English settlers establishing Jamestown, the full Virginia General Assembly Resolution on Juneteenth can be read at <http://www/njclc.com/resolution.htm>. While acknowledging the state’s democratic traditions and ideals, the document also explicitly anchors its importance in the long legacies of enslavement and racism that have persisted and evolved from the first importation of indentured Africans to Jamestown in 1619, extended in the “stain and legacy of slavery” of 250 years of bondage through a Civil War.

Most hopefully -- if still tactfully and somewhat vaguely -- our Commonwealth now seeks an exceptional role in looking ahead to common purpose: “Virginia will again be set apart as a national leader in seeking to bridge a difficult past and complicated present to attain a harmonious and prosperous future and the commemoration of Juneteenth offers an occasion to remember the bonds of our unity and common destiny.”

One leader in the Old Dominion’s long and complicated social histories and political traditions was Thomas Jefferson, whose achievements in voicing liberty but failures to help end slavery are jointly noted in Item #5 of the state’s Juneteenth resolution. Fittingly, Monticello’s own Juneteenth observances were

held this year on June 16, the month's third Saturday, as the state Jefferson once governed has officially prescribed.



Photo: The Daily Progress, July 5, 2018.

As part of Monticello's celebrations, a multiracial gathering of over 300 descendants of the people Jefferson enslaved joined together on the steps of his West Lawn, bringing to new life the iconic image gracing the the back of our nickel. This year, Monticello timed a number of major events to advance the spirit and heritage of Juneteenth. In a meaningful tie to Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" and his ideals of liberty, Monticello's Juneteenth celebrations additionally featured the rare display of an original copy of the Emancipation Proclamation, loaned for the occasion by historical philanthropist David Rubenstein. Most lastingly, the statewide commemorations that day included the grand (re)-opening of the 'South Wing' on the Monticello plantation, more fully interpreting the story of the enslaved community, including Sally Hemings and her children. And in even broader, digital reach, the international attention brought further opportunity to frontline their growing community-based project,

‘Getting Word: African-American Families of Monticello’ (explore <https://www.monticello.org/getting-word>)

As ‘Getting Word’ evolves into a multimedia website and repository, it also models the type of archival and oral history projects that are vital to historical organizations. Indeed, this type of family-based ‘crowdsourcing’ holds particular importance to local history groups, summoning the range of all ancestors, neighbors and institutions that have shaped our everyday experiences, whether in Rockbridge County or elsewhere.

Overall, this creative clustering of events isn’t envisioned as a one-off day of programming, synced to the nationwide observance of a growing Juneteenth tradition. Rather, it’s another aspect in Monticello’s signal commitment to include more diverse voices, archival documents and archaeological evidence, while still advancing and contextualizing the multiple narratives that illuminate Jefferson’s life: his free and enslaved families, his presidency and plantation, and legacies of democracy and human inquiry at large.

Rockbridge histories, programs and exhibits similarly hold the capacity to foster collective conversations, while candidly addressing cultural controversies. By focusing on community histories, we have the vital opportunity to connect and counterpoint some of the more traditional icons of recorded histories, with the everyday lives of the range of citizens who’ve lived in our area: across class, gender, race, era [I’ve written a related article on these issues for the Virginia Association of Museums, with particular focus on Civil War Memory: <https://www.vamuseums.org/blogpost/1155695/237512/The-Nexus-of-Crisis-Conversations-in-Controversies>].

Here in Rockbridge, we can not only look to the broader legacies of slavery and freedom, but can also take the opportunity to consider how wartime emancipation may have played out on our familiar streets and terrain.

In June of 1864, 18,000 U.S. Army troops led by Gen. David Hunter were campaigning through the Valley in pursuit of Confederate troops led by Gen. John

McCausland. A Confederate stand at the Maury River failed to stop the shelling of VMI by Union artillery positioned just north of Lexington. On June 11, retreating Confederates burned the bridge over the North River (now, the Maury River) and began to move south. On June 12, Hunter ordered VMI Barracks burned, reckoning it as a military target; and buildings and materials were looted at neighboring Washington College (now Washington & Lee University). The town of Lexington was largely spared physical damage, though some residents had fled, a number of them taking their slaves for fear of the harder edge of war and the property losses involved. After occupying the town, Union forces would depart toward Lynchburg on June 14. This would be the only large-scale military action that would be fought in Rockbridge during the war.

The Rockbridge Historical Society has published two rich accounts of Hunter's raid, one in a chapter of Charles Bodie's county history, Remarkable Rockbridge, with a fuller accounting in Richard Halseth's "Three Days in Lexington: The Uninvited Visitors of June 1864" (Rockbridge Historical Society Proceedings Vol. XII).

For all their well-noted records, however, neither has identified any sources noting a public declaration of emancipation in the area, along the lines that would follow a year later in Texas. For me, it's a fascinating gap, one of history's 'telling silences,' inviting us to newly imagine the scene. What did emancipation look like in Lexington?

It may be that no such order was formally read by Union officers here. Though it's important to recognize, in that context, that Gen. David Hunter's 'infamous' nickname, "Black Dave," was not merely some melodramatic moniker. Strikingly, he'd actually earned the name earlier in the war by independently emancipating black slaves in three states (no less strikingly, Lincoln rescinded Hunter's orders, as they pre-empted his own executive Proclamation, and delicate political negotiations with Congress).

It may also be possible that some announcement did occur in the streets of Lexington, yet was not seen of immediate or prime concern in contemporary accounts of the direct and dramatic arrival of war. Margaret Junkin Preston and Cornelia McDonald wrote diaries and letters that sketch vivid portraits of this

period and have been excerpted and published in accessible formats over the years. Yet neither recount such official proceedings, during the admitted clamor and chaos of war that June, and the sudden new order that came with it.

It would be remarkable, indeed, to uncover some new archival source illuminating that moment of local freedom, that foundational historical turn, born from those few days of conquest. What an opportunity, to hear those voices at the crossroads of historic time, and familiar place: whether speaking in an official register or replying in vernacular tone; whether articulating the various responses of the liberators, or those vocally resisting the new order. How would Lexington and Rockbridge look, in that critical moment, related to other small Virginia or Southern communities in similar circumstances? At present, that's a half-sketched but important chapter in Rockbridge history that we haven't yet fully chronicled.


What we do know is that some slaves — as throughout the South — were already freeing themselves. Individually and in small groups, men and women were emancipating themselves by running away, the promise of Union lines in Virginia's many campaigns offering a new star to follow. The following advertisement was placed in the Lexington Gazette on May 13, 1863, only months after Lincoln's Proclamation, over a year before the Union Army occupied Lexington, and still two years before the war's end and full abolition.

RANAWAY

FROM the subscriber at Buenavista Furnace, Rockbridge county, Va., on Sunday night, the 31 of May, three negro men, all of whom were lately bought in Richmond, viz: - Sandy, from Cumberland Co. N. C., 25 yrs of age 5 ft. 6 inch. high, tall, dark color, and bright countenance. - Bryant, from Pitt Co., N. C., 22 years old, 5 ft. 10½ inch. high, scar on root of fore-finger, on right hand: dark mulatto color. Jerry, from Cumberland Co., N. C., 21 years of age, 5 ft. 8½ in. high, ginger bread color. I will give \$200 each for them if caught and put in any jail so that I can get them or \$250 for each of them delivered at my Furnace.

S F JORDAN.

May 13. 1863 --tf



Advertisement offering reward for return of three runaway slaves: Sandy, Bryant and Jerry. All three men had been recently purchased by Rockbridge industrialist Samuel Jordan, presumably to work at his Buena Vista Furnace Works, duly noted. ([Lexington Gazette](#), May 21, 1863)

The “subscriber,” Samuel Jordan, owned the Buena Vista Furnace Works, one of the County’s important industrial complexes; the manufactory was also a point of focus in Rockbridge Historical Society’s recent June program on the histories of the surrounding South River area (<https://rockbridgehistory.org/events-2/>). Like many forges and furnaces in the region, Jordan’s operation would supply key resources for the Confederate war effort, often shipped to the factories at Richmond’s Tredegar Iron Works. Jordan’s emerging manufacturing enterprise was an operation that relied on a mix of free and slave labor. Whatever happened to Sandy, Bryant and Jerry, “lately bought from Richmond,” other slaves owned by Jordan would have been emancipated a year later when Hunter’s troops occupied Lexington and destroyed the Buena Vista Furnace Works in the process.



“Iron Hand,” ca. 1860. RHS Collections. Found in South River district near old Buena Vista Furnace Works (destroyed in 1864), thought to be cast from the hand of an enslaved or free black worker, based on labor patterns of the time. In 2019, RHS will loan the artifact to the American Civil War Museum in Richmond for the exhibits in Grand Re-Opening exhibits: requested by their curatorial staff for its arresting visual form, and capacity to interpret industrial slavery.

In these comparative lights, Rockbridge would see different pathways to freedom and to citizenship before, during, and after the Civil War. And for some, the next steps would prove tragic, by turns. As detailed in David Coffey’s revealing article, “Reconstruction and Redemption in Lexington” (also in Rockbridge Historical Society Proceedings, Vol.XII), the wake of the war in Lexington brought some uneasy accommodations in local race relations, along with new opportunities for freedwomen and men. But within a few years, threats of violence — not to mention the 1869 lynching of Jesse Edwards, a freedman who’d been held in the Rockbridge County jail, accused of the murder of a white girl, Susan Margaret Hite

— would sorely temper the spirit of liberation that Juneteenth seeks to honor and deliver anew.

Over the years, Juneteenth hasn't enjoyed broad, frequent public celebration in our area's local events or programs. But family gatherings, churches, alumni groups and increasingly, social media have provided means to connect generations, both within and beyond Buena Vista, Lexington and Rockbridge. Some of us have joined festivities in larger areas in the region: Roanoke, Staunton, Charlottesville or the broad annual draw at the Booker T. Washington National Monument.

But in thinking about how traditions emerge and evolve over time, I'll close by turning from the Juneteenth holiday more specifically, to communal memory more generally. Some questions to reflect on:

- **What would new festive traditions look like in our community? Or newly revised ones?**
- **Who do we rely on to help bring those collective acts into reality, into meaningful ritual?**
- **What can we, individually, bring to the table, through our own traditions, families, values?**
- **Where have we come from? Where do we go from here? And who are we going with?**

For our part, we hope that the Rockbridge Historical Society and organizations like ours can play some role in continuing to provide perspective on how these patterns have played out locally, over the arc of time.

And we hope that Rockbridge Historical Society will continue to serve as a repository for the pictures and memorabilia, the artifacts, documents and stories that can help preserve your memories, your witness, for generations to follow.