

Melrose's 3rd Annual Juneteenth Ceremony

Read remarks by keynote speaker, Salem State University American History Professor Jamie Wilson



Pictured: Melrose residents and father and son duo Joe Phillips and Michael Phillips raise the Juneteenth flag as NSJA member Janey David sings the Black National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” during Melrose’s Juneteenth Flag Ceremony (Photo Credit: Raj Das, ED Photography).

About the Ceremony

On Friday, June 16, members of the Melrose community joined the Office of Mayor Paul Brodeur, elected officials, Salem State University Professor Jamie Wilson, Medford Poet Laureate Terry Carter, and other North Shore Juneteenth Association members as the City celebrated Juneteenth during its third annual Juneteenth Flag Raising Ceremony.

The ceremony, which took place at City Hall, was made possible through a partnership between the Office of Melrose Mayor Paul Brodeur and the North Shore Juneteenth Association (NSJA) to celebrate Juneteenth—Emancipation Day—and increase public engagement and awareness of the significance of the holiday.

In addition to Professor Wilson's keynote remarks and a live poetry performance by Poet Laureate Carter, of Medford, the Juneteenth celebration featured a powerful reflection by Lynn resident and activist Dr. Reverend Andre Bennette; remarks by Keshawn Little; a performance of the Black National Anthem "Lift Every Voice, and Sing," by Janey David; and remarks by City Council President Jen Grigoraitis, Mayor Paul Brodeur, Representative Kate Lipper-Garabedian, and Senator Jason Lewis.

Melrose resident Michael Phillips, age 12, raised the City's Juneteenth Flag with his father, Joe Phillips, a Melrose Human Rights Commission member and Chair of Mayor Brodeur's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Task Force.

In addition, Mayor Brodeur read the City's official Juneteenth proclamation, which is available at the Melrose Public Library for residents to sign as a way of joining the City's aspiration of being, "One Community, Open to All," and honoring the history and significance of the Juneteenth holiday and the City's Black community.

Juneteenth, also known as Emancipation Day or Freedom Day, represents the end of slavery in the United States. Despite Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation taking effect on January 1, 1863, hundreds of thousands of Black people continued to be enslaved in the United States. It was not until Union soldiers delivered the news of the abolition of slavery in Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865, that the last group of enslaved Black people in the United States were freed. The following year, on June 19, 1866, the first official Juneteenth celebrations took place in Texas.

Ceremony Keynote Speaker:

Salem State University American History Professor Jamie Wilson



Pictured: To close out Melrose's Juneteenth Ceremony, Salem State Professor Jamie Wilson describes the realities of slavery in the United States and the true yet lesser-known history behind Juneteenth (photo credit: Raj Das, ED Photography).

About Professor Wilson

Jamie Wilson, of Malden, is a Professor of History at Salem State University where he teaches courses in United States and African American History. He is also the author of several books including the upcoming biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., titled *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Life in American History*. He is an expert in 20th-century American history; African American history; African Diaspora history; the Black Panther Party of Connecticut; the Civil rights movement; and Health politics in Harlem, New York.

Jamie J. Wilson. Remarks at Juneteenth Flag Raising. Melrose, Massachusetts. June 16, 2023.

In his remarks at the signing of the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act, President Biden said Juneteenth is “A day in which we remember the moral stain, the terrible toll that slavery took on the country and continues to take.”

This evening for a few minutes, I would like to remember that stain.

The enslavement of West African peoples began in North America in 1565, when Spanish colonists brought enslaved Africans to present-day St. Augustine, Fla. In 1619, there was a turning point in the English speaking colonies when Governor George Yeardley and Abraham Piersey in present day Fort Monroe in Hampton, Virginia negotiated an agreement with the captain of the White Lion, an English ship which had seized Angolan slaves from Spanish slave traders.

Yeardly and Piersey traded food for Angolan slaves, and effectively entered the English speaking, North American colonies into the transatlantic slave trade, a trade in which European merchants exchanged manufactured goods for enslaved Africans, whom they shipped to the Americas for New World commodities, which they then shipped back to European markets. As England’s North American colonies developed in the seventeenth century, slavery took root in every colony including Massachusetts. We New Englanders take pride in the abolitionist spirit that was so pervasive in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, but we forget that Massachusetts was the first colony to legally sanction chattel slavery in 1641. For 150 years, as the frontier moved farther west, slavery moved with it.

The decades after Revolutionary War brought with it the manumission of large numbers of black Americans in northern and upper south states. Vermont abolished slavery in 1777. In 1780 Pennsylvania began a gradual abolition of slavery. The Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that slavery was incompatible with the state's new constitution in 1783.

However, despite revolutionary fervor, calls for democracy, and declarations of equality, our founding fathers and mothers protected slavery and their own personal interests. Again, as the frontier moved further west, slavery moved with it so that the number of enslaved people in the United States grew from roughly 700,000 in 1790 to approximately 3.9 million in 1860. New slave states entered the Union. Kentucky 1792, Tennessee 1796, Louisiana 1812, Mississippi 1817, Alabama 1819, Missouri 1821, Arkansas 1836, Texas and Florida 1845. In the 1840s and 1850s as the U.S. gained the territories in the Southwest from Mexico and the Oregon country from Great Britain, the growing anti-slavery movement intensified its efforts, and the Republican party sought to halt the expansion of slavery in those territories. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 called for the settler of those territories to decide whether they would be a free state or a slave state.

By 1860 when Abraham Lincoln is elected president, the nation was at a tipping point. Even though Lincoln maintained that he had little authority to regulate or abolish slavery in states where it already existed, eleven southern states committed treason when they seceded from the Union in late 1860 and the opening months of 1861 for fear that slavery and their dominance over black people would end.

When the Civil War begins with the attack of Fort Sumter in April 1861, it causes Lincoln to rethink his and the nation's position on slavery. That reevaluation eventually leads to the Emancipation Proclamation.

This year we celebrate the 160th anniversary of the Proclamation. It reads in part:

... on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.”

It goes on to list those states and parts of states in rebellion. It does not list the states of Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, or Missouri, border states, slave states that remained loyal to the union. So, slavery continued in those states after the Emancipation Proclamation. Slaves in Delaware were not freed until December 1865 when the thirteenth amendment was ratified.

It is myth to say that enslaved African Americans in Texas did not know about the proclamation or that Texas was such a frontier land that the news of the proclamation had not reached the Lone Star State until the summer of 1865.

Lincoln’s administration used the telegraph to send and receive information about the war and on Jan. 1, 1863 the War Department telegraph distributed the Emancipation Proclamation. More than 100 Texas newspapers mentioned the Emancipation Proclamation between 1862 and 1864. White slaveowner knew about the Proclamation as did enslaved blacks. Blacks in Texas had a communications network unknown to many whites including their enslavers. The real reason people were still in bondage in Texas in the summer of 1865 is because local leaders and the Texas Confederate constitution prohibited manumission. That’s why slave owners from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas took their slaves to Texas.

So, it was not a matter of lack of information in Texas; it was matter of a lack of enforcement.

Gordon Granger, a union general arrived in Galveston, Texas, on June 19, 1865 with thousands of Union soldiers many of whom were African American to reimpose Union control. Union control meant enforcing the Proclamation.

Upon their arrival Granger's officers issued five orders. General Order No.3 has come to be known as the Juneteenth Order. Granger did not deliver a grandiose speech in front of an eager crowd, instead, his staff posted the order around town and it was published in local newspapers.

It reads:

“The people are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property, between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them, become that between employer and hired labor. The freed are advised to remain at their present homes, and work for wages. They are informed that they will not be allowed to collect at military posts; and that they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere.”

June 19, Juneteenth, is a holiday black Texans created to commemorate the day that enslaved black men and women in Galveston received official notification of their freedom and the promise that the army and the government would enforce that freedom. It does not mean that every black person in Texas learned about it that day. Those enslaved in the country side would not have heard it. It does not mean that blacks just left their enslavers, but it was nonetheless a life-changing moment for those enslaved and their progeny.

Throughout the late nineteenth century black Galvestonians honored their long awaited liberation with annual celebrations. As their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren left Texas during the Great Migration of the early twentieth century they took Juneteenth with them and it came to known by different names, Emancipation Day, Independence Day, and Freedom Day, so one would not have been surprised to find Juneteenth celebrations in Los Angeles and Oakland or Detroit and Chicago.

In the mid twentieth century annual Juneteenth celebrations continued throughout Texas, but all but disappeared in other parts of the country, until it was revived in the late 1960s.

That fact that Juneteenth is a national holiday to be celebrated by all Americans is partially the result of the tireless effort of black cultural activists like Opal Lee, who in 2016 at the age 89 walked from Texas to Washington, D.C, over 1400 miles, to call attention to the importance of making Juneteenth a national holiday.

I did not grow up celebrating Juneteenth; instead, we participated in Watch Night services on December 31 to honor the Emancipation Proclamation which took effect on January 1. I do not have a familial or historical connection to the holiday.

Shortly after President Biden signed the proclamation of the official federal holiday, I spoke to my brother and told him that I appreciated the symbolism of Juneteenth, but with continued systemic racism in all sectors of our society, I thought it was too little too late, a way to placate black people. He responded to my frustration and said, “It may be too little, but I’ll take it.”

I continue to think about his response and have changed my stance somewhat. I am still frustrated at the slow pace of racial justice in this country, but have come to see Juneteenth as

opportunity to deal with the hard history of slavery and racism while celebrating and honoring the resilience of a people, my people, who helped build this country.

As a nation our history of slavery and racism is complicated and unsettling for us.

Something that many of us would like to forget. We as a nation don't like tough history, so we either tend toward simplified, often sanitized children's version of our past or Hollywood's "based on a true story" versions with good guys and bad guys, a sensational plot, and an easy resolution. We are entertained, not informed.

As we attend our barbecues and festivities this weekend, I encourage you think about how our freedoms today are inextricably linked to the enslavement of others in the past.

And with that I say thank you.