

The Union Army and Juneteenth, 1865

Introduction

This engraving depicts a White Union soldier reading the Emancipation Proclamation to an enslaved family. It was published in 1864 by Lucius Stebbins, based on a painting by Henry W. Herrick. According to Stebbins, the scene “represents the only way in which the glorious news could reach the . . . slaves, viz.: through the faithful soldier.”¹

On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln used his wartime powers to issue the [Emancipation Proclamation](#),² which declared that “all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State . . . in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.” However, on its own, the proclamation did not have the power to free anyone in the Confederate states. It needed to be enforced by the United States Army. As US forces advanced throughout the South, enslaved people acted upon the proclamation by escaping to freedom in the army camps. In Texas, where there were very few battles and the Union Army did not gain any territory, enslaved people did not learn about the Emancipation Proclamation for more than two years.

The last battle of the Civil War was fought at Palmito Ranch, Texas, on May 13, 1865. Even though the South won that battle, the collapse of the rest of the Confederacy and the capture of Jefferson Davis on May 10 compelled Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith to surrender the last Confederate Army on June 2 in Galveston, Texas.

On June 19, 1865, Major General Gordon Granger arrived at Galveston and immediately issued General Orders No. 3, declaring,

The people of Texas 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 becomes that between employer and hired labor. The freedmen are advised to remain quietly 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.³

¹Harold Holzer, “The Emancipation Proclamation in Art, Iconography, and Memory” in Harold Holzer, *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views, Social, Political, Iconographic* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), pp. 114–117.

²Spotlight on a Primary Source: Emancipation Proclamation, 1863, History Resources, The Gilder Lehrman Institute, gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/emancipation-proclamation-january-1-1863.

³Michael Davis, “National Archives Safeguards Original ‘Juneteenth’ General Order,” *National Archives News*, June 19, 2020, www.archives.gov/news/articles/juneteenth-original-document.

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By the time Granger printed this order, the “Executive” who issued it, Abraham Lincoln, had been assassinated by John Wilkes Booth and the [Thirteenth Amendment](#)⁴ abolishing slavery throughout the United States had been passed by both houses of Congress and sent to the states for ratification.

In the years following the Civil War, June 19 was celebrated by Black communities in Texas, first as Emancipation Day and later as Juneteenth. As Black Texans moved to other states, they brought Juneteenth with them. The celebrations gained popularity during the Civil Rights Movement in 1960s and many states have followed Texas’s lead by making Juneteenth a holiday commemorating the end of slavery.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction. Then apply that information and your knowledge of American history to answer these questions.

Questions for Middle School Students

1. What does the image tell you about the experiences of some Black people and the conditions they lived under in nineteenth-century America?
2. Who made sure the Emancipation Proclamation was enforced?
3. Why did the people in the engraving need the Emancipation Proclamation read to them?
4. To what extent does Abraham Lincoln deserve the title “The Great Emancipator”? Support your answer with evidence from primary sources such as the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth Amendment, and other sources.

Questions for High School Students

1. How would you describe the expressions on the faces of the newly emancipated people in this scene?
2. Lucius Stebbins wrote that the “only way in which the glorious news could reach the . . . slaves, viz.: through the faithful soldier.” Do you agree with his assessment? Why or why not?

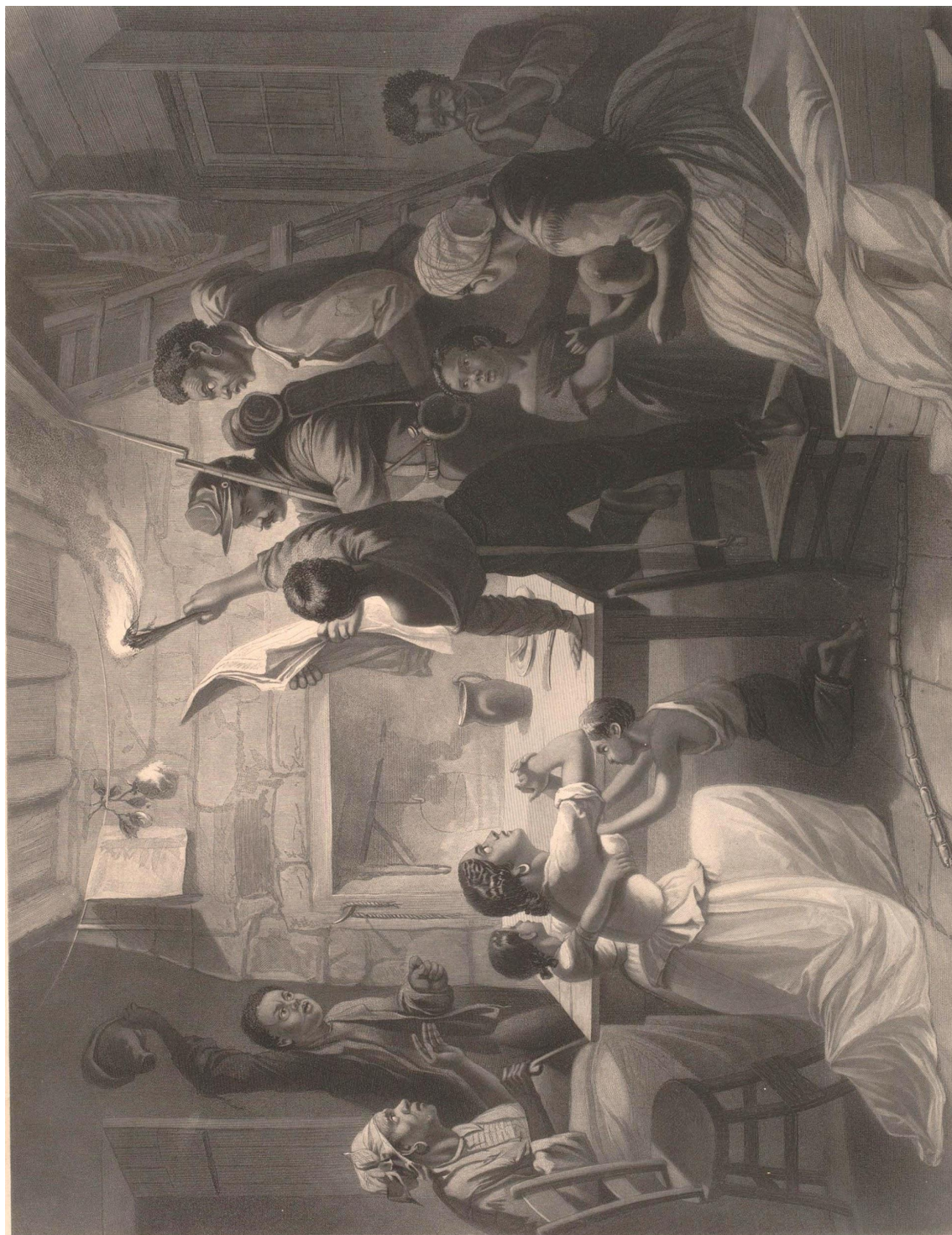
⁴ Spotlight on a Primary Source: Ratifying the Thirteenth Amendment, 1866, History Resources, The Gilder Lehrman Institute, www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/ratifying-thirteenth-amendment-1866.

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3. Major General Gordon Granger stated in General Orders No. 3 that “the freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages.” Why do you think this was included?
4. Why do you think General Granger included the warning that the newly freed “will not be allowed to collect at military posts”?
5. In General Orders No. 3, Gen. Granger wrote, “This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves.” Has this goal been achieved? Please provide details.
6. How did Black people self-advocate and fight for their own freedom?

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Image



Lucius Stebbins. *Reading the Emancipation Proclamation*, Hartford: 1864. After a painting by Henry W. Herrick. (Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07595)