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## TRUTH IN LOVE

### Juneteenth National Independence Day: *What Are We Truly Celebrating?*

By Parris J. Baker  
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*Editor's note: Following is a Truth in Love Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Parris Baker. It was first published in June 2022.*

In June 2021, Proclamation 95 was transformed into Public Law 117-17 as the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act.<sup>[1]</sup> An American federally recognized holiday, PL 117-17 received unanimous support from the United States Senate and a vote of 415 to 14 in the United States House of Representatives.

During this festival holiday on Father's Day this Sunday, like many other federal holidays, fireworks will fill the air, commemorative flags will be waved, and lots of food will be cooked and consumed. But what will America be celebrating? Only recently have most Americans been made familiar with Juneteenth and its place in American history.

On June 19, 1865, two months after the end of the Civil War, Major General George Granger announced in Galveston, Texas, General Order No. 3, marking the end of slavery. Proclamation 95, an executive order by President Abraham Lincoln, had been issued more than two years earlier on January 1, 1863. Referred to as the Emancipation Proclamation, this declaration changed the legal status and method of identification for approximately four million Black people. No longer were Negroes in Confederate states considered an enslaved people. However, not being a slave did not mean that black people were free.

A portion of the decree announced:

That 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.

The freedoms promised by Proclamation 95 were not enthusiastically enforced, particularly in many of the former confederate states. Though the Civil War effectively ended with the surrender of Robert E. Lee on April 9, 1865, there were many obstacles that were placed in the path toward freedom. When President Lincoln was assassinated on April 15, 1865, Vice President Andrew Johnson of Tennessee became President of the United States and the leader of U.S. Reconstruction. He immediately granted pardons to many of the Confederate leaders who were promptly either appointed or elected to prominent government positions. Their goals were to return state governments to pre-Civil War treatment of Negroes. The promise of 40 Acres and a Mule, issued as Special Field Order No. 15 in January 1865, by William Sherman was overturned by President Johnson in fall 1865. Almost simultaneously came the birth of the Ku Klux Klan, a domestic terrorist group that used violence, intimidation, and belief in white supremacy to reverse policies and social and economic conditions that benefitted Black people. One method to accomplish this reversal and to restrict the independence, self-determination, and autonomy of newly freed Black people was the institution of Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws.

The 13th Amendment, the abolition of slavery, ratified in December 1865, made owning slaves unconstitutional. Citizenship rights for Blacks were not constitutionally guaranteed until June 13, 1866, with passage of the 14th Amendment and the Civil Rights Act of 1866. Voting privileges were not secured for Black men until the ratification of the 15th Amendment on December 26, 1869. These amendments were attempts to establish and protect the rights of newly freed Negroes. Unfortunately, the clause in the 13th Amendment; ***Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted,*** shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Black codes, established primarily in former Confederate states, regulated, or restricted the livelihood of Negroes. These codes determined and dictated to Blacks where and how long they could work (requiring written evidence of employment), who they could marry, and the right to buy and own property.

Violation of these Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws, enforced by all-white police departments, adjudicated by white judges and juries resulted in the immediate incarceration of the freed Negroes. Blacks could be jailed for minor offenses such as loitering, breaking curfew, vagrancy, carrying weapons (2nd Amendment did not apply to Negroes) or being unemployed. To return Blacks to the status of slaves, convict leasing was created to provide cheap labor to white property owners.

Given these despotic, oppressive, and inhumane ecologies that were the byproducts of Juneteenth, there have been many private debates and public discussions about who and what should be celebrated. I submit that we must celebrate the contributions of all the courageous Black and white women and men who were and are committed to the struggles of democracy, freedom, and justice, despite the resistance of those committed to the culture of white supremacy. Moreover, we must celebrate their personal sacrifices of life and liberty to secure the promises and the pursuit of life, liberty, justice for all. We must celebrate the resistance and resilience of Black and brown people who were determined not to be defined by their surroundings and the unimaginable environmental conditions created to reinforce inferiority and their constant struggle for education, employment, achievement, and dignity.

Yes, our nation has made significant progress from the cruel racial climate of 1865. But, this progress, at times, has occurred using the most inefficient methods of economic and social change possible. Once again, our nation is struggling with vigorous attempts to restrict voting rights, citizenship rights, and women's rights. Banning Critical Race Theory, building walls, and buttressing immigration restrictions, cannot and will not stop people from interacting, learning, and growing together. The hue of America is browning and that continued darkening of America must not be feared or resisted. America began in the beautiful hues of our indigenous native brothers and sisters.

We must also celebrate today's contemporary freedom fighters, such as John Lewis and Elizabeth Cheney, who are reconciled to defending democracy, freedom, and justice; those who are committed to walk together, reminded of our pledge of allegiance to remain indivisible so that the declaration, Black Lives Matter, is not an offensive or political statement, but a reminder of our humanity, that All Lives Matter. Our collective histories, when known and shared, reveal how great a nation we are and inspire the possibility of who we can become when we lessen the load of our brothers, fight for the freedoms of others, and love our neighbors as ourselves.

During Juneteenth on Sunday, June 19 we must celebrate the hope espoused by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so eloquently elucidated on April 3, 1968: "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Parris J. Baker is an Associate Professor at Gannon University, where he is the Social Work, Mortuary Science and Gerontology Program Director. An alumnus of Gannon, Baker received his graduate degree from Case Western Reserve University, Jack, Joseph, & Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences and his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work. Presently, Baker serves as the Senior Pastor of Believers International Worship Center, Inc. He is married and has five children.



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## References & Suggested Readings

[1] <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2021/06/legislative-history-of-juneteenth/>

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