



**June 19, 2023**

**Dear Friends of Hallie Q. Brown,**

On June 17, 2021, Joe Biden signed the legislation making [Juneteenth National Independence Day](#) the 11th federal holiday. Two years later, only 26 of the 50 States along with the District of Columbia have made it a permanent state holiday. Which begs the question as to why the other 24 States have not done so. I have a theory...

But first, a little background. The other ten federal holidays are: [New Year's Day](#), [Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), [Washington's Birthday](#) (also celebrated as President's Day), [Memorial Day](#), [Independence Day](#) (July 4th for those unfamiliar with the official name), [Labor Day](#), [Columbus Day](#) (we'll circle back to this one), [Veterans Day](#), [Thanksgiving Day](#), [Christmas Day](#).

Independence Day is arguably the longest running holiday in America. While Christmas and New Year's were observed before colonizers arrived on these shores, America did not exist until July 4, 1776 when independence was declared from England. In 1777, a celebration with an official dinner for the Continental Congress, speeches, music,

parades, troop reviews, fireworks and ships in port decked with red, white, and blue bunting and other activities took place. Each year following, other notable observances happened, but these observances were all based on individual states' activities. In 1870, Congress created federal holidays to correspond with those happening on the states' (or territory's) level. New Year's, Independence Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas were the original four federal holidays established.



*A July 4th, 1819 celebration depicted at Philadelphia's Centre Square in a John Lewis Krimmel painting. Source: [Wikipedia](#)*

After this, several of the holidays are created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: George Washington's Birthday (1879), Decoration Day (now known as Memorial Day (1888)), Labor Day (1894) Armistice Day (1938) which later became Veteran's Day after we were involved in more wars. The most recent three are Columbus Day (yes, it is **still** a federal holiday (1968)), Birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1983) and of course, Juneteenth (2021).

It will come as no surprise that Juneteenth has had the longest journey from initial observance to being made a federal holiday, but what might surprise you is the reason why. It is because Juneteenth commemorates the end of Slavery in America, and we teach Slavery as the history of Black people instead of the history of white people.

Remember that theory I mentioned earlier...

While I give you a moment to wrap your head around that and let it sink in, let's take a look at holidays, or perhaps two in particular, and the history of our country.

Most of the holidays are pretty easy to understand why they have federal designation as they celebrate either the United States military, significant United States history, or holidays that are celebrated internationally. However, Columbus Day is truly an oddity in this mix of 11, not just because it's based in a lie and connected to genocide, but because it doesn't actually have anything to do with actual United States history, but rather mythmaking.

When I was growing up, we were taught that Columbus had discovered America and that was the reason for the holiday. But then we learned that he hadn't actually discovered anything, much less "America" because he landed in the Bahamas (which was stretched to include "the Americas," all the while ignoring the Indigenous people that were living here.) Then we were told Columbus Day wasn't just about the man himself, it was also a celebration of Italian heritage and culture, which begs the question of why it's a federal holiday even more.

Heritage and culture, especially the different ones that make up this melting pot or salad bowl of a country, should be acknowledged and celebrated; but no other cultural or ethnic group holiday has federal designation. St. Patrick's Day is not a federal holiday, nor is Cinco De Mayo or even Diwali. So, what makes Italian culture significant enough to be raised above all others? It can't be numbers; before 1881, the vast majority of immigrants, almost 86% of the total population, arrived from northwest Europe, principally Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia. Further, between 1870 and 1900, the largest number of immigrants continued to come from these same areas. Conversely, an article in the New York Times in 1895 reported the population of Italian Americans as numbering only half a million people while the US Population went from 62 Million (1890) to 76 Million (1900). While there were many Italian Americans who were greatly contributing to American life and society, there was seemingly nothing that would distinguish the Italian American community to the level that would justify a federal holiday when no other cultural group has had that.

And now we're back to the mythmaking. You see, back in 1776, with the violent break from England, this fledgling nation was looking to create its own story. We talk now about the Founding Fathers and Revolutionary heroes, but at the time of our independence, they were not thought of in that way, nor did they want to be. No one was interested in being raised on a pedestal while their story was still being told, and certainly not above their peers. The country was searching for a hero and found Columbus, dead for 270 years and ripe for mythmaking. He was regarded as an explorer, a brave hero who challenged the unknown sea and rather than falling off the edge of the world, an adventurer who "discovered" a new land. In Columbus, America found the figure who could be elevated by storytelling. Enter, about the same time, Columbia, a mythic female counterpart, bound to Columbus, that was the embodiment of the new country. She was first made famous in Phillis Wheatley's poem, [To His Excellency, General Washington](#).



The thirteen colonies were actually called Columbia before the American Revolution, and she emerged as the first Lady Liberty; King's College changed its name to Columbia College in 1784, South Carolina name its capitol Columbia, "[Hail Columbia](#)" was the unofficial national anthem until "The Star Spangled Banner" became official, in 1924 Cohn-Brandt-Cohn (CBC) Film Sales reorganized and changed their name to Columbia Pictures taking the image of the icon woman as their logo. The Columbus/Columbia myth took hold and [Tammany Hall](#), also known as the Columbian Order of New York, held the first Columbus Day celebration in 1792. In 1892, President Benjamin Harrison, in an attempt to placate Italian Americans after [the lynching of 11 Italian immigrants the year before](#), declared Columbus Day a "one-time national celebration." In 1934, because of the lobbying efforts of the [Knights of Columbus](#) and a New York Italian businessman ([Generoso Pope](#)), Congress passed a statute that requested the President issue a proclamation annually on October 12th declaring it Columbus Day with all the coinciding fanfare. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued such a proclamation along with a plan to offer citizenship to 200,000 elderly Italians living in the United States who had been unable to acquire citizenship due to a literacy requirement, as an apology for their being designated "enemy aliens" and put into internment camps. Mariano A. Lucca founded the National Columbus Day Committee in 1966 which was successful in lobbying to create the federal holiday in 1968.

Now, at this point, you're probably saying to yourself, what does all this have to do with

Juneteenth? Well, we're getting ready to dig into that.

Now, let's consider some of the facts. President Roosevelt issued a proclamation, removed the designation of "enemy aliens" and promised 200,000 Italians citizenship a year before they were even released from the internment camps. Meanwhile, Japanese-Americans would languish another 3 years in the camps and received no proclamations or gifts of citizenship. In fact, it would be nearly 40 years after that before the U.S. Government would conclude that the internment had been because of racism and explore reparations. There is no federal holiday celebrating Asian American heritage and culture.

President Harrison issued his proclamation of a national celebration in 1892 (which included social progress amongst its themes) because of the lynching of 11 Italian immigrants the previous year. That same year, 161 Black people were lynched and for the ten years prior, 893 Black people. Yet there has been no proclamation, no national celebration of African American heritage and culture, no federal holiday.

Now, the natural inclination would be to respond with, "*Until now. Until now because we have Juneteenth,*" but you would be wrong.

You would be wrong because Juneteenth is not a celebration of African American heritage and culture, it is a celebration of the end of Slavery and the emancipation of enslaved African Americans. It INCLUDES elements of African American heritage and culture, because, for the most part, we are the only ones who have celebrated it. Most white people over past 157 year haven't celebrated the end of Slavery.

Let that roll around in your head for a moment and remember what I said earlier about how we teach about Slavery.



Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, Nkyinkyim Installation, 2018, National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama (photo: [Michael Delli Carpini](#), CC BY-NC 2.0)

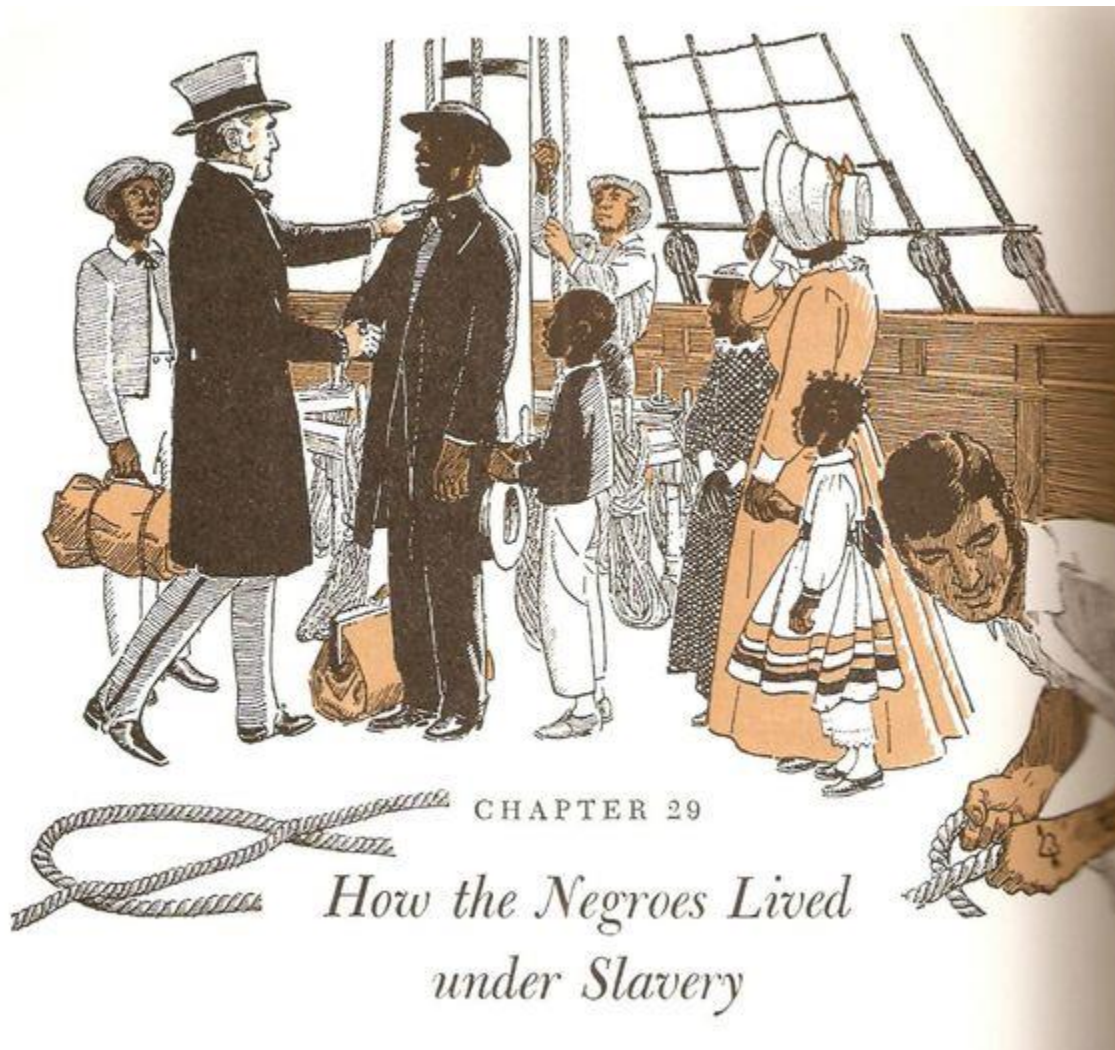
Slavery was one of the greatest atrocities in the history of this country. It was immoral, dehumanizing, oppressive and malicious and will forever be a stain on this great nation. Beginning in 1619, abducted Africans were placed into chattel slavery and distributed throughout the United States as property for white people and subject to all manner of atrocities. And even once the importation of slaves was outlawed, racist enslavers continued to force-breed them, utilizing their numbers to secure representation in the electoral college, the White House and Congress in addition to their labor, all while denying them their rights as people and Americans...Why wouldn't you want to celebrate the ending of that? Why wouldn't everyone want to share in the ending of that collective nightmare?

Because we teach Juneteenth as the acquisition of freedom for Black People and not as the ending of white people committing atrocities towards and oppressing their fellow Americans.

We teach about Jim Crow as Black people being oppressed, marginalized, murdered and lynched. Why do we not teach about it as white people imposing the [Black Codes](#),

laws designed to disenfranchise and segregate Black people, and taking license to kill any Black person they felt like, for any reason?

We teach about the Civil Rights Movement mainly as Black people and allies demonstrating and marching for freedom and to stand against oppression. Why do we not teach about it as white people being so enraged at the thought of a Black person in their school, sitting at their lunch counter or living in their neighborhood that they assaulted them every chance they got, firebombing their churches, lynching their fathers, beating up their children?



Why do we teach Slavery, Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement with an emphasis on Black people being oppressed, but only to a degree white people can stomach, but not of white people's thoughts, actions and rationale of committing the acts?

The answer is the current movement happening in different parts of our country to not teach the parts of history that make white people uncomfortable. Elected officials and

parent groups are banning books, banning subjects, creating alternative "facts" all so that white children and white people as a whole don't have to feel "bad." And that's the core component, history at a distance.

But what about the Black children and families that already feel bad, have trauma, are living in a depressive state because they've been constantly told they are less than, not as good as, and far behind, white people. Why do we have to feel the brunt instead of those who committed the acts?

Because we teach Slavery as the history of Black people and not as the history of white people.

I think it's probably time we stopped doing that.

Juneteenth is about freedom, liberation...emancipation, not just of Black people, but of America. It is a celebration of America being emancipated from the nightmare of Slavery, our country casting off the darkness of oppression and turning towards the light of liberty. It is a celebration of the moment when our country chose to move forward and have a new birth of freedom, finishing the work that those who gave their lives in pursuit of that effort, so nobly advanced.

Juneteenth is a day that EVERY American should celebrate. And perhaps when we all do, maybe...I don't know, just maybe, we will give true meaning to those age old words: "*My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.*"





*Emancipation Day celebration, June 19, 1900 held in "East Woods" on East 24th Street in Austin.  
Credit: Austin History Center.*

Sincerely,

Jonathan Palmer  
Executive Director